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THE RANI OF JHANSI

A HISTORICAL PLAY
IN FOUR ACTS

The
RANI OF JHANSI

A HISTORICAL PLAY
IN
FOUR ACTS

by
PHILIP COX

LONDON
GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD
MUSEUM STREET

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1933

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
UNWIN BROTHERS LTD., WOKING

To
ETHEL
MY SISTER

WHOSE UNSTINTED HELP HAS MADE
THIS WORK POSSIBLE

FOREWORD

THE label "Joan of Arc" has been so indiscriminately applied in historical themes that I hesitate to follow others in using it of a character with the racial background and social setting of the Rani of Jhansi. And yet, no one who studies the very meagre evidence that is available concerning this remarkable woman can help being struck by resemblances between the chequered life of the Rani and the reputed career of the Maid of Orleans. Both of them came on the scene in their respective countries during a period of decadence and disorder. Both of them gave expression to slumbering national sentiment through insistence on dynastic preservation. They both sought—in their widely differing spheres—to arouse the energies of their compatriots by taking a leading part in military operations against the same invading power, England. And in each case a violent death was the precursor of a momentous political development—the establishment of the French national state and the consolidation of the Indo-British connection.

At a time when international understanding has become a commonplace among intelligent people, it has seemed right to me that an effort should be made to present—in a pictorially vivid fashion—some of the salient historical data about the Rani that can be gleaned from the records. The French Maid having achieved immortalisation in England, it is quite conceivable that a sympathetic portrait of the Indian counterpart of Joan of Arc may do something to bridge that gulf of ignorance and prejudice that separates Britain and India.

In offering this dramatic version of events in the Rani's life, I naturally have availed myself of the dramatist's privilege to select, edit, and embellish the available material—all too scanty in this instance—according to my own reading of her character. The play is not intended to be

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an accurate historical representation; and it may well err, therefore, on the side of caution or of exaggeration—according to the taste of the reader. The perfervid Nationalist may not be thrilled by it; and the ardent Imperialist may cavil at certain features of its interpretation. It does not pretend to hold any message for present perplexities, but is merely an individual approach to the reading of a character and period that possess great significance in the history of Indo-British relations.

LONDON

July 1932

HISTORICAL NOTE

THE district of Jhansi, with a chief town of the same name, is situated in the south-west corner of the United Provinces of India—in a tract of country known as Bundelkhand; so called on account of the Bundela Rajputs who migrated there in early times and founded many small but vigorous kingdoms, a few of which are in existence at the present day. In the heyday of the Moguls, these rulers of Bundelkhand were undoubtedly feudatory to the central authority at Delhi; but later on, when the Moslem power weakened, a continuous state of revolt and internecine fighting seems to have been prevalent among the Bundela chiefs. This condition of affairs was intensified by the arrival from the west of warlike Maratha bands, who soon established hereditary kingdoms of their own amongst the Bundelas that looked to Poona (the seat of the Maratha power) for protection and alliance rather than to Delhi.

The Jhansi *raj* in Bundelkhand (annexed by Britain in 1854) was one of these Maratha states; and it had been held by its Maratha rulers for quite a hundred years, before it was absorbed in British India. Great Britain's contact with it came about as a result of the Treaty of Bassein (1802), which assigned to the British power in India all the rights, privileges, and duties in regard to subsidiary states, which had previously been exercised by the Peshwa (on behalf of the Maratha Confederacy). Thus the fealty that the Jhansi rulers had originally accorded to Poona was transferred to the Governor-General at Calcutta.

The subsequent incorporation of the Jhansi *raj* in British India was brought about by the application to this feudatory state of the much criticised "Policy of Lapse," which Lord Dalhousie's administration was responsible for. By virtue of this policy, the principle of escheat—whereby in English Law all property that is left without an heir reverts to the Crown—was held to apply in cases where a Hindu ruler,

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having no direct heir, sought to adopt a son in conformity with Hindu precept and practice. Three such adoptions were effected during the régime of Earl Dalhousie; the states concerned being Satara, Nagpur, and Jhansi—each being under the rule of a prominent Maratha family. In all three cases the Board of Directors of the East India Company, acting upon the recommendation of the Governor-General, refused to recognise the title of the adopted heir and ordered the annexation of the territories, with suitable payments to the dependants of the last ruler.

CHARACTERS IN THE ORDER OF THEIR APPEARANCE

MAMA SAHIB (Moroo Bulwant)	The father of Rani Lakshmi Bai.
NARA SINGH	<i>Dewan</i> or Chief Minister to Gangadhar Rao, the last Raja of Jhansi.
LALA LAHORI MULL and LALA TATTI CHAND	Two other Ministers of the Jhansi <i>raj</i> or state during Gangadhar Rao's régime.
ANUND RAO	The young adopted heir of Gangadhar Rao.
RAO APPA	A Maratha retainer of the Jhansi ruling family.
RANI LAKSHMI BAI	Widow of Raja Gangadhar Rao, last ruler of the Maratha state of Jhansi.
GANGA BAI	A previous consort of Gangadhar Rao.
MAJOR ELLIS	British Political Officer in Bundelkhand in 1853.
MIRA BAI	Dancer in the Jhansi ruler's Palace.
J. A. DORIN and FRED. J. HALLIDAY	Members of the Executive Council of the Governor-General in India during the year 1854.
J. P. GRANT	Secretary to the Government of India under Lord Dalhousie.
COLONEL JOHN LOW	Another Member of the Governor-General's Executive Council in 1854.
MILITARY SECRETARY	At Government House, Calcutta, in 1854.

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EARL DALHOUSIE	Governor-General in India from 1848 to 1856.
BAKSHISH ALI	<i>Daroga</i> or Officer-in-Charge of the jail at Jhansi in 1857.
JEMADAR LALL BAHADUR	Leader of the rebel <i>sepoys</i> from the 12th Regiment of Native Infantry.
RISSALDAR LALL MUHAMMAD	Leader of the rebel <i>sowars</i> from the 14th Irregular Cavalry.
GENERAL SIR HUGH ROSE	Commander of the British forces in the Central India Campaign of 1858.

Guards, Wrestlers, Acrobats, Female Attendants, Towns-
men, Elders, Maratha and Afghan Warriors, *Sepoys*,
Huntsmen, Camp Followers, and British Soldiers.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I—1853

SCENE ONE. The Private Garden of Rani Lakshmi Bai on the afternoon of December 24, 1853.

SCENE TWO. The Courtyard of the Rani's Palace at sunset on the same day.

SCENE THREE. The Durbar Room in the Palace—an hour later.

ACT II—1854

SCENE ONE. The Council Chamber at Government House, Calcutta, on March 1, 1854.

SCENE TWO. Five minutes later on the same afternoon in the Council Chamber.

ACT III—1857

SCENE ONE. The Durbar Room on June 5, 1857—in the morning.

SCENE TWO. Same as in Scene One. Two days later—in the evening.

SCENE THREE. Same as in Scene One. Three days later—at nightfall.

ACT IV—1858

SCENE ONE. The Palace Courtyard on the evening of March 3, 1858.

SCENE TWO. The Durbar Room shortly after midnight on April 2, 1858.

SCENE THREE. A Flower Garden at Kotah-ki-serai, near Gwalior, on the evening of June 17, 1858.

FINAL TABLEAU

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ACT I—1853

SCENE ONE

SETTING. *The action takes place on the afternoon of December 24, 1853, before sunset—in the private garden of Rani Lakshmi Bai, to the west of the citadel of Jhansi. The garden is built on a slope that falls away to the left and is laid out rather in the Persian style. An air of restful seclusion pervades the place, the high wall of the fortress securing its privacy on two sides. On the third side—towards the right—where the ground rises, lies the citadel, hidden behind a grove of tamarind trees. On the left, at the point where the fortress wall is closest to the auditorium, a narrow flight of marble steps is visible, leading up to the temple of Mahadeo—the favoured Deity of the Hindu population of Jhansi. The temple must be conceived as standing well forward, to the left of the garden. It is out of view and the fortress wall should give the impression of encircling it. The steps lead to the side of the temple and are the private entrance of the ruling family only. In the centre of the garden, a fountain is playing—on one side of which a long wooden seat has been built, richly carved and protected by a canopy of costly material. The seat is covered with rare Indian upholstery, including pillows; and one or two low stools of Indian design can be seen near it.*

MAMA SAHIB, father of Rani Lakshmi Bai, the widow of the late Raja Gangadhar of Jhansi, enters by the steps on the left. With him is NARA SINGH, the Dewan or Prime Minister of the Jhansi raj or state. The two men are middle-aged Hindus of the upper class; MAMA SAHIB being well set-up and robust, with the general

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air of a fighting-man. NARA SINGH is built on delicate lines and is slightly bent. He wears a rather crafty look on his finely chiselled features. They have been visiting the temple of Mahadeo as an act of respect to the memory of the recently deceased ruler of Jhansi. Both of them are dressed in spotless white garments of the kind affected by well-to-do Hindus in Northern India. They wear no outward ornamentation of any kind and are bare-headed, as well as bare-footed. Crossing the garden slowly, they pause from time to time—to emphasize their remarks. Their demeanour is serious as they speak.

MAMA SAHIB. I tell you, friend, as long as my daughter, the Rani Sahiba, has Ganga Bai for a companion, our plans for the future of the *raj* will be thwarted. It was an evil day when we permitted the former consort of Raja Gangadhar to become friendly with Lakshmi Bai. I was a fool. I should have known that daughters need watching even after marriage. The Rani Sahiba would never have dared to change towards me, her own father, had it not been for Ganga Bai's influence. It is very humiliating! The father of the principal Rani treated like a menial in his own daughter's palace! If the Raja were still alive, I would soon put Lakshmi Bai in her proper place! In the temple just now I am certain I felt his presence next to me, as the oblations were being offered in honour of the departed.

NARA SINGH. Were it not that the Rani Sahiba's present state of mourning demanded the constant attendance of a companion, means could be found for removing Ganga Bai to her father's house.

MAMA SAHIB (*shaking his head dubiously*). I doubt if we could do anything now. Lakshmi Bai seems to be growing more independent each day. Have you forgotten how she upbraided me in public yesterday for not urging on her recognition as Regent of the *raj*, in terms of the late Raja's will? She hinted plainly that

I was in league with you and the other Ministers to prevent her from attaining her rightful position.

NARA SINGH (*musingly*). It is as difficult to fathom the mind of a woman as to find water in the desert. Instead of leaving affairs of state to be managed by those who understand them, the Rani Sahiba seems anxious to undertake them herself. It is incredible!

MAMA SAHIB (*savagely*). It is *not* incredible, it is Ganga Bai. Babbling all the time about Queen Victoria and Rani Ahalya Bai. When women start creating their own heroes, there is bound to be trouble for us men.

(*At this point LALA LAHORI MULL and LALA TATTI CHAND, two other Ministers of the Jhansi raj, appear from the right and salute MAMA SAHIB and NARA SINGH in the usual Hindu manner. They are middle-aged Brahmins of the prosperous type, but are garbed in plain white—like the two others—out of respect to the late ruler.*)

LALA LAHORI. I am glad we have found you, respected Sirs. Major Ellis is here, speaking to the officers at the citadel. The English Government is concerned about the constant trouble we are having with our jail prisoners; so the Major Sahib has been asked to investigate and report.

LALA TATTI CHAND. We both thought that it might be a good opportunity to find out whether there was any fresh news from Calcutta about our appeal to have Kumar Anund's adoption recognised. So we hurried to let you know of the Major Sahib's presence here in our midst.

NARA SINGH (*brightening up*). Thanks, Brothers, thanks! It was a very wise thought on your part.

MAMA SAHIB (*spiritedly and at the same time moving towards the right*). Let us hurry and see if the Major Sahib has anything to say. There may have been important developments, so we must not lose time.

(*The four men move off quickly towards the right*)

and are almost out of view when ANUND RAO, the adopted heir of the late ruler of Jhansi, appears from the left by the steps, accompanied by RAO APPA, an elderly Maratha retainer of the Jhansi ruling family. ANUND RAO is an agile, attractive boy of about seven years. He is dressed in white and is in mourning; as is RAO APPA also. They come down the steps holding hands, but as soon as they reach the garden ANUND RAO breaks away and runs ahead, jumping with excitement.)

ANUND RAO. Now we can go and do some *tulwar* exercise, Rao Appa. Can't we? (RAO APPA smiles and nods.) Come on, I'll race you to the citadel! Come on! Quick! Before the Rani Sahiba arrives! I'll give her a surprise. RAO APPA. All right, Kumar Sahib, all right! You go on! I'll follow!

(ANUND RAO runs off to right, followed by RAO APPA. RANI LAKSHMI BAI enters the garden by the steps on the left, accompanied by her friend and inseparable companion, GANGA BAI, a previous consort of the late Raja of Jhansi, Gangadhar Rao. The latter has been dead just over a month, and the RANI is in mourning, being the principal widow. She is dressed in a plain white sari of heavy, rich stuff and a simple white underskirt and jacket of good hand-woven material. Though partly covered by the sari, it can be seen that her head has been completely shaved. Her feet are unshod, and she wears no jewellery or ornamentation of any sort. GANGA BAI, too, is dressed very plainly. Her garments are of coarser material than the RANI's and they are not so white in colour. She is bare-footed, but her head is unshaven. The RANI is taller, younger, and more handsome than GANGA BAI. She moves with a commanding dignity, in spite of her state of mourning. GANGA BAI's attitude towards her is one of respectful familiarity. The two women have

*been visiting the temple and enter the garden talking
—the RANI in advance of GANGA BAI.)*

RANI (*in rather bitter tones, although her outward manner is serene*). Neither Mahadeo nor any of the Gods can satisfy this hunger that I feel, O Ganga Bai. What a terrible handicap it is to be born a woman in this man-ruled world! To be aware of one's destiny, to know one's powers; and yet be unable to go in search of that which keeps beckoning one onwards! (*She reaches the seat and reclines on it, drawing up her feet alongside of her body.*)

GANGA BAI (*sitting down on one of the stools and massaging the RANI's feet*). Our Tukaram has said:—

“How the lotus all the night
Dreameth, dreameth of the light!

As the stream to fishes, Thou .
As is to the calf the cow.

To the faithful wife how dear
Tidings of her lord to hear!

How a miser's heart is set
On the wealth he hopes to get!

Such, says Tuka, such am I,
But for thee I'd surely die.”*

If such be your desire, O Mighty Lady, neither Gods nor men can prevent you from realising your heart's wish.

RANI. Sister, the yearnings of a holy saint, seeking for release, are very different from the strivings of a helpless woman—anxious to restore the fortunes of the Marathas. Men turn to religion as a way of escape from the world. (*With a deep sigh*) But we women need religion as an inspiration to help us to meet the

* From Macnicol's *Psalms of Maratha Saints* (Heritage of India Series).

difficulties that hem us in on every side. (*She continues with vehemence*) When I think of the way in which the noble Ahalya Bai strove for thirty years to preserve order in Indore, how she used her knowledge of the *Shastras* to maintain peace and prosperity in the Holkar dominions, it makes me almost weep with shame that my own ambition to save Jhansi should be frustrated at every turn.

GANGA BAI. Madam, if anything needs saving, it is Jhansi! My father used to say that in Raja Ram Chand Rao's time there were as many creditors of the *raj* as there were revenue-paying tenants; and that in course of time the territories of the Raja would disappear through debts and plunder. Since the English helped themselves to a large slice of our lands, even the moneylenders have become frightened to advance the treasury any funds. They say that the security has dwindled away almost to nothing.

RANI (*with increasing bitterness*). You know, Ganga Bai, how during the late Raja's long illness I sustained myself with the hope that I should be made Regent sooner or later! And I would certainly have stood in my husband's place, had not the Ministers thwarted me by pretending that the Raja was able to attend to business himself. Thus were they able to keep the power in their own hands—the jackals! And now that the Raja is no more and we have adopted Anund, the old fools say that we cannot proclaim the new régime until the English Governor-General recognises the adoption. (*She sits up and speaks with great emotion.*) The stupidity and selfishness of men maddens me, Ganga Bai. I could tear their lying tongues out of their mouths when they pretend that they are acting in the interests of the *raj* in not setting up Anund as the Heir and myself as the Regent at once. I can see as clear as noon-day that they are anxious to stand well with the English, in case Jhansi is annexed.

GANGA BAI. Be patient, my noble sister! The English are grasping and unscrupulous, but they are not fools. They well know the value of a loyal Maratha house like Jhansi in the midst of all these shifty Bundela chiefs.

RANI (*rising and pacing to and fro near the seat*). I wish I could feel assured about that. With any other Governor-General I should feel fairly safe. But this Lord Dalhousie has a mouth as wide as the sea. Already he has swallowed Satara, our oldest Maratha Kingdom; and one hears now that Nagpur, the territory of the Bhonsle family, is to be extinguished—for the same reason, the absence of a direct heir to the last ruler. Then there are the Punjab, Sikkim, and Burma—all greedily devoured by this English monster. I cannot help trembling for the fate of our little Jhansi.

GANGA BAI. Ah, noble lady! The English are clever rogues and always like to appear royally generous. They will prefer to keep Jhansi independent, so that they may be able to say: "You see! We are friends of the weak rulers, especially those who govern their territories as well as the late Raja of Jhansi did in the last years of his life. So we have recognised his act of adoption, in order to show our appreciation of his loyalty." It is good business for them, Rani Sahiba. Do not concern yourself so much about the matter. It is bound to come right in the end. And even if it does not (*here she reaches forward and, touching one of the RANI'S feet with her fingers, raises the same hand to her own forehead*) Ganga Bai will always be at your service, regardless of all cost.

RANI (*putting her hand on GANGA BAI'S head and speaking with great affection*). Sister! We who have shared the bed of the same unfortunate man and have known what all women sooner or later come to learn—that woman is a mere sport and plaything for men—must stand by one another in the days that are to come,

whether they be happy days or evil ones. And even as the sainted Ahalya Bai dedicated herself to the task of saving Indore, so let us give all our thoughts, all our energies, all our prayers, to the saving and making prosperous of this (*she points to their surroundings*) our beloved little Jhansi. Why should the English be allowed to secure these lands and buildings and trees and water without a struggle? Will they love them in the way that you and I care for them? Will they feel the presence of all the past generations of Marathas, who helped to tear these beautiful lands from the Moguls and the Rajputs? Will they understand the needs, the hopes, and the fears of the *ryots* better than we who have made our homes in Bundelkhand for over a hundred years? No one knows the answer to these questions better than my father and the Ministers, and yet they procrastinate and talk, while nothing is being done to save the *raj*. (*With intense emotion*) I have a strange premonition, Ganga Bai, that unless I do something myself, our beloved Jhansi will be lost!

(*While she is saying these last words, her body drawn up to its full height and her eyes fixed as if in a dream, shouts of "Hoo-ah!" "Hooh-ah!" in a child's voice are heard. Immediately after, ANUND RAO enters from the right, followed by RAO APPA. ANUND RAO bears a small tulwar and shield, poised and ready for action. RAO APPA is similarly armed, except that his weapons are made of wood. As soon as the boy secures the RANI'S attention he begins to attack RAO APPA in mock combat. The latter pretends to give way before the onslaught and then simulates a stumble, which places him at the mercy of ANUND'S tulwar. The boy then assumes the pose of a victor, and placing one foot on RAO APPA'S prostrate body, raises both his hands above his head, shouting: "Anund Kumar-ki-jai." Both the ladies*

are immensely interested in the pantomime; and they clap their hands in Indian fashion and join in the cry: "Anund Kumar-ki-jai!")

RANI. That is splendid, my son! I am glad you are doing your *tulwar* exercises so industriously. It is the duty of a Maratha chief to be always prepared for the enemy. Now come to me and I will teach you a true Maratha oath. (ANUND comes up to her.) Hold your *tulwar* straight out before you in your left hand, and put your right hand over your heart—like this (*showing him*). Now repeat these words after me:

"I believe in Khandoba, the Sword-Father, and in Mulhari, who are both Shiva, the Destroyer of Evil, the Purifier of Life, and the Healer of Mankind. I shall follow in the footsteps of Shivaji and Shambuji and the great Peshwas, who succoured the poor, fed the needy, and humbled the arrogant. I swear to be a true Maratha, to fight tyranny, punish oppression, and spread religion. To all who require help and protection, I shall readily listen; and my doors shall never be closed against those who follow the life of devotion and seek the holy way of release."

(While the RANI and ANUND RAO are repeating these words, MAMA SAHIB, NARA SINGH, LALA LAHORI MULL, and LALA TATTI CHAND appear from the right side, i.e. from the citadel side. They look on approvingly and wait till the end of the oath before they approach the RANI.)

MAMA SAHIB. Daughter, Major Ellis, the political representative of the English in Bundelkhand, has been here for the last hour. We have just left him to look over the defences with our military officers. The jail prisoners are becoming troublesome again, and we must take precautions against an outbreak.

RANI. I have repeatedly asked why it is that there are so many people in jail these days, and no one seems able to give me a satisfactory explanation.

LALA LAHORI MULL. Our prosperity attracts bad characters, Your Highness. Where there is food, there you will find hungry dogs.

GANGA BAI (*turning on him savagely and speaking with her hands on her hips*). And whose fault is it, Lala-ji, if the dogs are hungry? Whose fault is it, but our own—if we adopt policies that drive hungry men to robbery and *dacoity*?

NARA SINGH. We are merely the instruments by which policies are carried out, Ganga Bai. You forget yourself. The ruler orders and we obey. Criticise the ruler, if you dare, but spare us from your kind attentions.

RANI (*speaking slowly at first and then working herself up to a great emotional climax*). Ganga Bai is right in what she says! Before the British took over the management of Jhansi our revenues were falling and the *raj* was badly in debt—but our tenants loved us then, because they knew that if their crops failed or their houses were burned down, the Raja would grant them a remission of their dues and help them in other ways. Now that these revenue-collecting landlords have been created and placed between the tenants and the *raj*, all direct contact between the ruler and the tillers of the soil has been lost. And—worst of all—the revenue that each is liable for has been fixed for a long period of time, and very often the assessment has been an arbitrary one. So that if a man should suffer by famine or drought or cattle disease or robbery, he is compelled to borrow money, not only to make good these losses, but also to meet the extortionate demands of the landlord and the *raj*. Is it any wonder that our jail is full, Dewan Sahib; and that people are saying to-day what they never said in the past—that Jhansi is a place for *dacoits* and moneylenders to thrive in? (*Turning dramatically in the direction of the temple and speaking with uplifted hand*) Bear witness, Ye Gods of our race! As soon as I shall become Regent

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of this Jhansi *raj*, my first endeavour will be to remedy the evils that afflict our poor *ryots*!

(There is a short period of tension here, which is broken by the RANI'S father, who clears his throat and then begins to speak.)

MAMA SAHIB. We came to tell you, Daughter, that Major Ellis appears to doubt whether Kumar Anund's title will be recognised by the Governor-General. The Major told us that he has received a letter from his superior, Major Malcolm, warning him on no account to commit the English Government as regards the adoption. The matter will be decided by Lord Dalhousie himself, when he returns from Burma.

NARA SINGH. And may I respectfully add, Madam, that Major Ellis has always been a friend to Jhansi and was largely responsible for the return of the *raj* to our own control more than ten years ago. It is disquieting, therefore, if such a person as he should fear the worst. He says that the fact that Colonel Low and the other members of the Governor-General's Council refused to recognise the Kumar's title in the absence of Lord Dalhousie suggests that these gentlemen were convinced that the man who swallowed Satara, the Punjab, Sikkim, Burma, and other places besides, would want to eat up Jhansi as well. The outlook is indeed black, Rani Sahiba.

RANI (*frigidly*). And what did you gentlemen say to the Major Sahib?

MAMA SAHIB. What could we say, Daughter? Idle threats are useless. We can but continue to petition—and hope for the best.

NARA SINGH. Of course, Madam, we besought Major Ellis to do his utmost for the preservation of the *raj*—and we made suitable hints as well as to the measure of appreciation the ruling family would be glad to show to those who may be of service to it in this critical time. Major Ellis was very kind and said that he would

see Major Malcolm about the matter again within the next two or three days. But he would make no promises. He seemed to think that Lord Dalhousie will not be affected by what any of the local officers may have to say on the subject. (*Rubbing his hands with a certain amount of satisfaction*) However, if the worst should happen, he has undertaken to press the English authorities for a handsome pension—to be granted to you for the benefit of the Kumar and all your dependants.

✓RANI (*who has been listening to the last two speeches with scarce concealed contempt*). And is that all my noble father and my brave officers could do—give hints and make supplications without receiving anything in return? (*Raising her voice*) Well, listen, all of you! From now onwards I shall be the spokesman of Jhansi with the English—I, who have been nominated as Regent and Guardian of the Heir by the late Raja! I have had enough of your servile diplomacy. It never succeeded in the past, and it will fail us again. The English despise you, and you know it full well. Now you shall let me—a woman—have a chance. They say a great Queen rules in England and all men obey her. Perhaps that will be a special reason for them to let me have my way. (*With added fire in tone and gesture*) Gentlemen! Consider me no longer as a submissive Hindu widow, but as Rani of Jhansi both in name and in fact. Dewan Sahib, let the criers go forth and assemble the people at sunset under the Ceremonial Balcony in the Palace courtyard. We must declare the Kumar's title without further delay. If the English reject the adoption, they will incur the hatred not only of the people of Jhansi, but of the whole of Hindustan. And will you, Father, bring Major Ellis to the Palace. We will fling our challenge openly and daringly. If Jhansi is to be lost, let us lose it like worthy Marathas—after making a fight! Lala-ji,

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command our wrestlers and sword-players and acrobats to appear at the Palace also. We must show the world that we still have some fighting skill left in Jhansi. Rao Appa, summon my palanquin from behind the trees. And, all of you, remember this: I *will* be obeyed. No matter who he is, or what his position may be, if anyone fails to heed my orders or to treat me as the head of the *raj*, he shall suffer for it! ✓

(A large, ornamental palanquin is borne in. The RANI approaches it, but before she enters she turns and raises her right hand, shouting out: "Kumar Anund-ki-jai." The MINISTERS all raise their hands and repeat the cry. The palanquin is then borne off to the left—but not by the steps. GANGA BAI walks alongside the palanquin, the RANI being within. ANUND RAO has come right forward as the RANI is departing; and the two of them wave farewells to one another as the palanquin is carried away. MAMA SAHIB and the MINISTERS salaam as the palanquin leaves the garden; but as soon as it is out of sight, MAMA SAHIB strides forward and seizes ANUND RAO around the body and swings him on to his shoulder, at the same time turning him round so that he faces the MINISTERS instead of the departing RANI. MAMA SAHIB, then beginning to walk rapidly towards the citadel, shouts out loudly: "Jhansi Raj-ki-jai"; and the MINISTERS follow his lead, repeating the cry two or three times with him. ANUND RAO joins in, waving his tulwar over his head; and RAO APPA—bringing up the rear—does likewise.)

CURTAIN

SCENE TWO

SETTING. *The action shifts to the courtyard of the RANI'S Palace at Jhansi ; and the time is about sunset on the same day. The Ceremonial Balcony of the Palace overlooks the courtyard, which extends alongside the Palace building—a narrow, squat structure of the solid ornate type, favoured by Hindu princes. The Balcony, which is wide, projecting and of marble lattice-work, is in the tradition of Mogul architecture. It is of a later period than the rest of the Palace. Access to the ground floor of the building can be had through a strong studded door, controlled from within. Apart from this door, there is no other means of ingress on the courtyard side of the Palace ; the Ceremonial Balcony being built out from the Durbar Room on the first floor of the building. In the centre of the courtyard is a rectangular pit, filled with soft, greasy mud, and intended for wrestling bouts. The rest of the courtyard is hard ground, suitable for military and physical exercises. Very few trees are to be seen.*

The curtain goes up on an animated scene, as people stream into the courtyard from all sides, dressed in the garb of North-India Hindus. There are a fair number of Moslems present as well—the men bearded and the women veiled. The crowd is clothed in gaily-coloured garments, and all are keenly on the look-out for entertainment. Acrobats loosen their limbs in the mud pit, and jugglers practise their sleight-of-hand. On all sides there is light-hearted chatter and the simple joyousness of work-a-day Indians out for pleasure. Three or four burly, bearded men, in undress uniform and imposing turbans, good-humouredly marshal the people and keep order.

After a little while there is a sound of drum-beating (in the Indian fashion) and a blowing of conch-shells and bugles. The studded door is then thrown open from inside ; and a

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procession of soldiers, wrestlers, swordsmen, and lathi-wielders issues forth and lines up in formation under the Ceremonial Balcony. Thereupon, a gun is fired in an inner court of the Palace and the RANI, holding ANUND RAO by the hand and followed by the DEWAN and the other principal MINISTERS of the raj, appears on the Balcony. The whole crowd bows low and makes three deep salaams to the RANI and her party. The wrestlers and the other entertainers stand facing the Balcony, in front of the populace and join in the obeisance. The officials, soldiers, and guards are lined up close to the Palace wall, with their faces to the crowd and stand stiffly at attention, while the populace and the entertainers pay their homage to the RANI. After the third salaam, the DEWAN comes to the front of the Balcony—alongside of ANUND RAI and the RANI—and addresses the crowd. Everyone remains standing.

NARA SINGH. Brothers and Sisters of Jhansi! You all know the sad circumstances in which our late well-beloved ruler, Raja Gungadhar Rao, passed away from us just about a month ago. Fortunately for us, our late Master was able to secure the succession of his line, by adopting an heir before he closed his eyes. This heir was chosen by the Rani Sahiba and the Ministers of the *raj* and was actually seen and accepted by Raja Gangadhar himself before his death. It was thus possible—as everyone is aware—to carry out the prescribed ceremonies at the funeral of our late respected ruler. Raja Gangadhar also left instructions that till the adopted Kumar was able to discharge the functions of rulership, his widow, Rani Lakshmi Bai, whom we all deeply respect and cherish, should administer the affairs of the *raj* on behalf of the heir. Although we have not yet received the formal recognition of the English Governor-General to the Kumar's title, the Rani Sahiba has felt that there ought to be

no further delay in presenting the heir to you—so that you may have no doubts as to who is going to be your future ruler. (*Turning towards ANUND RAO*) It is my most valued privilege and welcome duty, therefore, to present to you now Kumar Anund Rao, the adopted son and heir of our late ruler, Raja Gangadhar Rao. The Kumar will be fittingly received by the *raj* officials and by all his loyal subjects as soon as the recognition of our English over-lords is conveyed—either to the Rani Sahiba herself or to me as Dewan. In the meantime let us content ourselves by acclaiming our future ruler. (*Raising his voice he twice shouts out the words that follow, the crowd repeating the cry after him each time*) KUMAR ANUND-KI-JAI! KUMAR ANUND-KI-JAI!

(*The RANI then steps forward. She is still dressed in her widow's sari, but has a silver-embroidered white shawl draped over her person as well. She also has on a pair of white close-fitting women's trousers, and wears silver-work slippers on her feet.*)

RANI (*speaking in matter-of-fact tones at first*). My well-beloved and esteemed friends! The Dewan Sahib has truly described what has taken place in the Palace during recent days; and I have no further news to give you. But I feel that some explanation is necessary to set at rest the uneasiness that may be in your minds concerning my present actions. Some of you may be wondering why I—a Hindu widow, who believes in strict adherence to the injunctions laid down in the *Shastras*—permit myself to be seen in public, so soon after my lamented lord's death. If the circumstances were different, I should be the last to countenance—let alone practise—any 'flagrant disregard of our ancient customs in the matter of mourning. But all of you will understand me when I say that we are living in dangerous times. (*Murmurs of approval, while people look at one another and nod.*) A strange unsettle-

ment has come over the land, and rumours of all kinds fly from one end of Hindustan to the other. (*Further demonstrations of agreement from the crowd.*) Change and disruption are in the air! (*More nods and cries.*) The Mogul power has disappeared and a new overlordship has sprung up almost magically in its place! Some of our oldest ruling families have passed into oblivion quite recently, and kingdoms that were like landmarks in Hindustan have ceased to exist within recent memory! (*Grave nods and whispers among the crowd.*) Is it to be wondered at, then, that some of us feel very anxious about the future of our small but dearly-loved Jhansi? Can I be blamed for coming to the conclusion that something must be done quickly to save our little Jhansi from the fate that has befallen other and more powerful rulers? In these critical times I truly believe that I shall be doing greater honour to the memory of my noble husband, if I take an active part in preserving the heritage and title of the heir. As the sainted Ahalya Bai served and saved the Holkar kingdom, so, too, will I endeavour—with Divine Help and Guidance—to serve and, if humanly possible, to save our Jhansi! That is why I am now asking you to show—in the clearest possible manner—that you approve of the late Raja's foresight in making Kumar Anund his heir. We must leave no room for doubt in the minds of the English that the people of Jhansi are loyal to their ruling family; that whatever may have been the state of affairs in Satara and Nagpur, Jhansi is peaceful and contented under its present rulers; (*speaking slowly and significantly*) that here, in this little kingdom of ours, we love our independence—such as it is—and will do our very utmost to maintain it!

(*During the last sentences of the RANI'S speech, the murmurs and sounds of approval of the crowd get louder and louder—till someone shouts "Rani*

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Lakshmi Bai-ki-jai," just as the speech ends. Everyone takes up the cry and the whole courtyard reverberates with the slogan, which is interspersed with shouts of "Anund Kumar-ki-jai." The RANI pauses on the Balcony for a little while, enjoying the demonstration of fealty and making little salaams to various sections of the crowd. She then turns round gracefully and—holding ANUND RAO by the hand—passes out of view. All the others on the Balcony follow suit, the DEWAN remaining to the end. Whilst the RANI is going within, the people remain bowed and make three deep salaams. As soon as the RANI has disappeared from view, the DEWAN shouts down to the guards, "Let the fun begin." He then leaves the Balcony himself.)

(An organised display of wrestling, aerobatics, sword-play, and mock lathi-fighting then follows, to the accompaniment of Indian drums and reed instruments. The crowd enjoy the spectacle immensely. After an appreciable length of time, the Palace gun is heard again. Instantly, all the officials, soldiers, wrestlers, and other performers spring to attention, forming lines that make a passage from the studded door to the centre of the courtyard. The door then opens and ANUND RAO, followed by RAO APPA, marches down the passage to a position in full view of the crowd, who again bow and salaam behind the stiffly drawn-up soldiers and athletes. ANUND RAO and RAO APPA are both accoutred for tulwar exercise as in Scene One, the former having laid aside the ceremonial robes in which he was presented to the people earlier in the evening. About the same time the RANI, followed by the DEWAN and MINISTERS, appears again on the Balcony. ANUND RAO and RAO APPA, when they reach the position referred to, turn round together and raise their tulwars by

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way of salute—first to the Balcony, where all salaam back, and then to the crowd on either side, who respond by again making low salaams. The boy and his attendant next engage in mock combat—the populace taking a keen interest in the contest. As the fight progresses the tempo of excitement increases. Soon the swordsmen and lathi-wielders start clashing their weapons, then the wrestlers begin beating their bare chests and limbs with their hands, and finally the acrobats, unable to restrain their ardour, begin throwing somersaults and doing tumbles and other movements. Meanwhile the crowd becomes more and more frenzied in its appreciation of ANUND RAO'S prowess with the tulwar, till a regular pandemonium reigns. Once again, as in Scene One, RAO APPA simulates defeat, and after giving way before the Kumar's attack, he stumbles and falls. As before, ANUND RAO assumes a pose of victory—with one foot on the prostrate body of RAO APPA. The RANI shouts out "Kumar Anund-ki-jai," and the curtain goes down on thunderous repetitions of that cry, with variations such as "Rani Sahiba-ki-jai!" and "Jhansi Raj-ki-jai!")

CURTAIN

SCENE THREE

SETTING. Time: *About an hour after sunset on the same evening. The action now takes place in the Durbar Room of the Palace at Jhansi, which is quadrantal in shape, with a domed ceiling, from the centre of which hangs an imposing golden chandelier. On the left of the room is the approach to the Ceremonial Balcony—an open marble doorway, which can be screened from the inside. The walls of the room are panelled in wood and covered with carvings and raised ornamentation of Hindu design. The ceiling is gilt and decorated with bright paintings, representing religious subjects taken from the Hindu scriptures. The floor is of marble and covered for the greater part by an expensive Persian carpet. Near the centre of the room is a high and richly upholstered seat or gadi, with silk-covered pillows upon it. It is wide enough and of sufficient length to permit of an adult person reclining on it at full stretch; and there is no back to it. At its side is a small carved sandal-wood table, on which stands an elaborate silver hookah, together with a golden box for betel leaf and spices; and on the floor—to one side of it—is a big brass spittoon. The only obvious seating accommodation in the room—apart from the gadi—is a low bench built along the circumference of the quadrant and facing the seat of honour. One end of the bench is much closer to the auditorium than the other; and the gadi presents an almost end-on view to the spectator. There are also two or three large cushions on the floor close to the gadi. The room appears in a rather subdued, rose-tinted light, due to the soft illumination of the chandelier striking on the general gilt tone of the ensemble. The entrance door is on the far side of the Durbar Room—just beyond the place where the bench begins.*

When the curtain goes up, the DEWAN, MAMA SAHIB, and

the two other PRINCIPAL MINISTERS are in the Durbar Room with MAJOR ELLIS, a tall, lanky, bronzed, athletic Englishman, clad in the bright scarlet-and-blue uniform of the period. The MAJOR is heavily side-whiskered, but otherwise clean-shaven and has an open, frank countenance and manner. He is seated on the bench, where it is closest to the auditorium; and next to him—sitting rather forward—is MAMA SAHIB. The DEWAN is standing up, facing them. All three wear grave faces. The other two are engaged in low-toned conversation on the far side of the room and cannot be heard.

MAJOR ELLIS (*with serious demeanour*). I have been placed in a very awkward position, Dewan Sahib. If it were not for the esteem in which I held the late ruler, I would refuse to stay at Jhansi a moment longer. As it is, Major Malcolm is bound to demand an explanation from me as to why I consented to interview the Rani after her open defiance of the Governor-General. It is all very unfortunate; and I begin to regret the personal interest I have taken in Jhansi's welfare during recent years.

NARA SINGH. Mama Sahib appreciates—as much as I do, Major Sahib—your predicament. (MAMA SAHIB *nods vigorously*.) And we both of us pray that you will be good enough to continue your charity and patience. (He bows low as he says this.) Believe me, Sir, we did our best to dissuade the Rani Sahiba, but she was adamant. Nay, more, she threatened to expose us to the people as being anxious to aid the English in annexing the *raj*.

MAMA SAHIB (*interposing eagerly*). You may take my solemn word for it, Major Sahib, we were entirely helpless. My daughter rejected her own father's advice more summarily than anyone else's. (*Shaking his head and speaking as if to himself*) She used to be so different.

MAJOR ELLIS (*thoughtfully*). And you say she is determined

to take over the administration of the *raj* herself, during the boy's minority?

BOTH. Yes, indeed!

MAJOR ELLIS (*pointedly*). Have you two gentlemen any enemies?

NARA SINGH. None of any consequence. At least, our intelligence service knows of none.

MAJOR ELLIS. Hm! (*Significantly to MAMA SAHIB*) Well, if you have no enemies, has—pardon the question—has the Rani Sahiba any friends? I mean intimate friends. Men friends?

MAMA SAHIB. In her position she must have councillors. But she is more than loyal—in every respect—to the memory of her late husband, although she indicated that she regarded her relations with him as a duty to be performed rather than a pleasure to be welcomed.

(A gong sounds at this point and they all become alert. The MAJOR and MAMA SAHIB rise from the bench; and the two other MINISTERS cross over and take up positions near the DEWAN.)

MAJOR ELLIS. Well, Gentlemen, the whole affair has become very serious—very serious indeed! I do not know what the upshot of it all is going to be. (*Impressively*) But—you understand?—I cannot meet the Rani Sahiba alone. To do so would be to recognise her as head of the *raj*—and you know what my orders are. So let there be no mistake, please. I can only remain in audience—with you gentlemen present. If you withdraw, I shall leave as well.

(A procession enters from the far side of the room. First come two boys very gaily dressed and armed with fly-whisks. Then follow four women, bearing spices, scents and a small silver hookah with its perfumed tobacco preparation in a silver dish—together with a goblet of sherbet and small glasses on a silver tray. Two men are next, carrying a low Indian settee, covered with rich upholstery and

luxurious pillows. Behind them come four other men, bearing a large brass frame, almost as wide as it is high. Within the frame hangs a heavy damask curtain, slung with rings from the top of the frame and reaching down to the floor of the room. Walking behind this screen and accompanied by GANGA BAI, who directs the bearers as to how they should move, is the RANI, dressed as in the previous scene. As she enters everyone bows low; and the MINISTERS as well as MAMA SAHIB offer deep salaams. MAJOR ELLIS, who carries a plumed helmet in his right hand, makes a sweeping bow. The procession moves to the centre of the room, the screen being interposed between the RANI and MAJOR ELLIS all the time. The settee is then placed on the floor, in front of the gadi; and the RANI, screened from MAJOR ELLIS, settles herself on it—in such a manner that she is in full view of the auditorium though hidden from MAJOR ELLIS and the MINISTERS. The women deposit the things they have been carrying on a small table that one of the screen-bearers has brought along in his free hand. They then sit in a group in front of the screen, but not so as to hinder the approach of anyone whom the RANI may wish to summon for intimate conversation. The male attendants, who carry daggers, align themselves on either side of the screen, facing the RANI's interviewers and unable to see her without turning their heads round, which on no account they are permitted to do. GANGA BAI settles herself on a cushion, near the RANI. She too is in full view of the auditorium, though hidden from MAJOR ELLIS.)

RANI (after settling herself on settee). Dewan Sahib, what entertainment have you offered to our distinguished guest?

NARA SINGH (advancing towards the screen). Noble Lady, I pressed the Major Sahib to allow me to send for the

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Palace musicians and dancers, but he declined the offer with apologies. He says that he has had a very long and tiring day and begs to be excused early to-night, as he has to leave at dawn on an important official visit far from here.

RANI (*with a touch of sarcasm*). The Major Sahib seems to be in a hurry to leave Jhansi. I thought he always liked visiting us. Didn't you say he was a friend of ours? (*The DEWAN looks at MAJOR ELLIS, who at first hesitates and then approaches the screen.*)

MAJOR ELLIS. Rani Sahiba, you wrong me! I always have been and I always shall be delighted to visit Jhansi. But just now—as you must be aware—the circumstances are a little difficult for me. As it is, I fear I shall get into trouble for having allowed myself to be received in audience before the Governor-General has given his decision on the question of the Kumar's adoption.

RANI (*rather pleadingly*). I have no wish to embarrass you, Major Sahib, especially since you are reputed to be well disposed towards the Jhansi *raj*. I am a Maratha; and I would be the last person to ask you to disobey orders. But now that you are here, what difference will it make if you listen to a little music and watch some dancing? As you yourself well know, in these parts we like to charm the mind and please the senses before entering upon important business. It is something which we believe to be due to our guests—as well as owing to our self-respect. However, if you are too tired——

MAJOR ELLIS (*impetuously and then trying to recover himself*). Not at all, Rani Sahiba, not at all! I should, of course, feel greatly honoured and delighted to be entertained by you. Only, I was thinking that perhaps you yourself might not feel disposed that way at the present moment.

RANI (*authoritatively*). Major Sahib, from to-day I have

taken over the management of affairs in Jhansi; and although I shall try to observe the practices of widowhood as far as possible, my duty to the *raj* will come before everything else. Please do not consider my convenience at all, therefore. My position requires me to arrange some entertainment for an honoured guest at Jhansi; and unless you expressly forbid me to extend a customary welcome to you, I shall summon the musicians and one of our best dancing girls.

(There is a short pause, during which MAJOR ELLIS looks at the DEWAN and then shrugs his shoulders helplessly. At the same time GANGA BAI steals very quietly up to the screen and, opening a flap, which covers over two small eyeholes in the damask curtain, takes a good look at MAJOR ELLIS. She then steps back from the screen and imitates the MAJOR'S gesture for the benefit of the RANI, who smiles. All GANGA BAI'S movements are hidden from the rest of the people on the stage, though she and the RANI are in full view from the auditorium.)

RANI. Dewan Sahib, will you kindly order Mira Bai to present one of her most graceful performances—not too long. And please ask the musicians not to play too loudly. We must do all in our power to charm away the Major Sahib's fatigue. Pray be seated, Sir—and all you gentlemen of the *raj* as well. I trust you will excuse me from not witnessing the dance myself. I shall, nevertheless, take pleasure in your appreciation of it.

(MAJOR ELLIS and MANA SAHIB take seats on the bench and the two other MINISTERS sit alongside them. The DEWAN goes out and immediately afterwards soft music is heard off-stage. Soon the DEWAN returns, followed by MIRA BAI, chief dancer to the ruling family, who first prostrates herself in front of the screen and then dances for the especial benefit of MAJOR ELLIS. The MAJOR smiles

encouragingly at MIRA BAI and throws her some money at the end of the dance. During MIRA BAI's performance, GANGA BAI once again steals up to the screen and peeps at the MAJOR. She then steps back and gives a careful glance on all sides, to satisfy herself that nobody is aware of what is taking place behind the screen. After that she beckons to the RANI, who hesitates at first and then steals up to the screen—to look at the Englishman. The RANI remains at the screen till the dance is about to finish, when she drops back to her settle—while GANGA BAI replaces the flap over the eyeholes. When MIRA BAI finishes dancing, she prostrates herself before the screen again, while cries and murmurs of approval arise from the MINISTERS. MAJOR ELLIS signifies his delight at the performance by vigorous hand-clapping.)

RANI. Lala-ji, reward Mira Bai well for her dancing this evening—and the musicians, too. I can appreciate the pleasure they have given—by the way in which the Major Sahib and the rest of you have responded to their efforts to entertain you.

(MIRA BAI gets up, bows low and makes a deep salaam—first to the screen, then to MAJOR ELLIS, the DEWAN, MAMA SAHIB and the other MINISTERS in turn. She then leaves by the door at the far end of the room.)

RANI *(sitting upright on the settle)*. Now I am ready for the interview! You may retire, Dewan Sahib and my respected Father—and all the rest of you. I wish to receive the Major Sahib in private audience.

(MAJOR ELLIS, the DEWAN, and MAMA SAHIB exchange quick glances. The DEWAN then signs to the guards and attendants to leave the room. When they have left, he clears his throat and addresses the RANI in very deferential tones.)

NARA SINGH. Rani Sahiba! Of course I and my brother

Ministers and your noble Father, Mama Sahib, will gladly obey your orders. But the Major Sahib has told us that it will not be possible for him to be received in audience alone by Your Highness. He fears that if he were to interview Your Highness privately, it would be considered as an act of recognition of your position as Regent. Therefore, Rani Sahiba, much as the Major Sahib would like to accede to your wishes, he feels compelled to insist that the Ministers of the *raj* should be present while he is in audience. Please do not take what I am saying amiss. The situation is a very awkward one for us all.

RANI (*obviously annoyed and standing up*). So this is how the worthy representative of the great White Queen and of the English Governor-General occupies himself at Jhansi—in carrying on an intrigue with the servants of the *raj* against the lawful heir and his Regent! This is the way in which this honourable Sahib shows his love for Jhansi—and my esteemed Father and valued Ministers express their loyalty towards me!

MAMA SAHIB. Calm yourself, Daughter! Do you not see that you are wronging our distinguished guest? He is only carrying out his orders—just as we, your servants, carry out your instructions. Till the Kumar is recognised by the English authorities, the Major Sahib is bound to deal officially only with the Dewan and the Ministers. This is but everyday practice; and it is unreasonable to expect him to treat Jhansi differently from any other kingdom.

RANI (*with some bitterness*). Well, if the Major Sahib cannot interview me as the representative of the *raj*, let him meet me as a woman! There is no rule forbidding a man to speak to a woman—least of all for Englishmen, who are so interested in women that they take more notice of their neighbours' wives than they do of their own!

MAJOR ELLIS (*in a conciliatory manner*). Madam, I assure

you I would be greatly honoured to accept your invitation. But I cannot think that you are anxious to have me disgraced—perhaps dismissed from the Service—for disobeying orders.

RANI. But who is to know if you speak to me for a few moments—just as man to woman and not as Rani and English official? I pledge you my solemn word that so far as I am concerned no one will ever know—no matter what happens in the future as regards the Kumar's title. And you can rest assured that neither the Dewan nor the other Ministers nor my Father will say anything about the matter, for they are anxious to stand well with our British rulers. (*Rather bitterly*) They may pretend that they are not, but I know better.

(*The DEWAN, MAMA SAHIB and the two MINISTERS look uncomfortable and hang their heads shamefacedly.*)

MAJOR ELLIS (*with resignation*). Well, if you put it that way, Rani Sahiba, I may as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb. (*Turning to the DEWAN*) As it is the express wish of the Rani Sahiba, you may leave us, Dewan Sahib. Only, not a word outside.

RANI (*sitting down*). Let it be known among the household staff that if any babbling comes to my knowledge, my displeasure will not soon be forgotten.

NARA SINGH. Your Highness's orders will be executed at once.

(*NARA SINGH first gives a quick, significant look at MAMA SAHIB and then bows low and salaams to the screen. The two other MINISTERS follow suit and the three then pass out of the door at the far end of the room.*)

MAMA SAHIB (*going up to the screen and speaking confidentially*). I take it you really do not wish *me* to leave, Daughter. You will doubtless consider the feelings of your subjects, who would naturally question the propriety of the late Raja's widow meeting a gentle-

man in audience alone. Besides, consider what our Bundela enemies would say if it were rumoured abroad that the Jhansi Rani had insisted on being left alone with an English officer! I am sure the Major Sahib will pardon the freedom with which I am obliged to refer to him. (*As he says this he looks at MAJOR ELLIS and makes a small salaam.*)

RANI (*rising with determination*). Father, since you have spoken with frankness you must not be surprised if I do so also—and I hope the Major Sahib will be as indulgent towards my words as you expect him to be towards yours. You speak of the feelings of my subjects, Mama Sahib; but what consideration did you show for my feelings when you married me to a man who was old enough to be my grandfather and who—you must have known—was a physical wreck into the bargain? What regard for me did you show when you condemned me to this early widowhood—I who am still young and have my good looks, who desired children, but could not have them through no fault of my own, who wanted love and a husband's society, but have been denied both? (*Tearing the curtain aside and standing revealed to MAJOR ELLIS, who tries to avert his gaze but appears fascinated at the spectacle of enraged beauty that the RANI presents.*) Mama Sahib, I am determined now to take charge of my own life and to live for my ends—and for Jhansi. You have gained the position you sought after through my becoming the principal wife of Raja Gangadhar. Keep what you have gained, but let me manage my own affairs in the future.

MAMA SAHIB, *after hesitating a little, bends low, salaams both the RANI and MAJOR ELLIS and then leaves the room. The RANI looks around and then resumes her seat on the settee. She indicates to MAJOR ELLIS that he should sit down on some cushions that GANGA BAI has been*

piling up near the screen. The MAJOR seats himself with a flop, at which all three, especially GANGA BAI, burst out laughing. GANGA BAI then removes herself to the far side of the room, taking with her the small silver hookah, which she lights and smokes in temporary solitude, her back turned towards the other two. The curtains of the screen remain drawn aside during the rest of the scene.)

RANI (*after sitting pensively for a little while*). Major Sahib, does the great White Queen ever feel lonely?

MAJOR ELLIS (*taken aback*). I have never given the matter a thought, Rani Sahiba; but I suppose, like everyone else, our good Queen Victoria feels solitary at times, although she has been happily married for more than thirteen years now.

RANI. They say that she is devoted to her husband. Do you think she would marry again if her present lord were to die? Your customs permit of widows remarrying, do they not?

MAJOR ELLIS. Yes, they do, Rani Sahiba; but that does not mean that all our women who lose their husbands try to replace them. Some English widows believe in remaining true to their past loves. Others prefer—or are compelled through circumstances—to make another venture in marriage. Perhaps the latter are more numerous than the former. (*Rather gaily*) Unmarried men—like myself—are said to have a weakness for widows; and so they say in England “Widows are dangerous.”

RANI. I suppose you have heard that there is talk going on in Calcutta about permitting Hindu widows to remarry?

MAJOR ELLIS (*looking hard at her*). Yes, I have heard of it; and I am very much interested. What do you think of the proposal?

RANI (*looking up towards the ceiling, as if arguing with herself*). It may be of use to poor women and those

whose position is of little account; but no high-caste widow of good family would dare to take a second husband, even if she felt inclined to do so. Her life would be made so miserable and she would feel such an outcaste, that she would prefer to die.

MAJOR ELLIS. Do you think, then, Rani Sahiba, that the only existence open for a widow of some social standing is complete isolation from the world?

RANI. Major Sahib, I suppose it is as difficult for you to understand our customs as it is for us to understand yours. We Hindu women are brought up in the belief that the wife is an indivisible part of the husband, without whom her life is not complete. Therefore, where a Hindu girl is blessed with a good husband, it is quite natural for her to feel that her loyalty should extend even beyond his death. Now that *sati* has been denied to her, she is compelled to search for other ways of expressing her fidelity to her dead lord. That is why I do not believe that women of the higher castes will ever want to remarry.

MAJOR ELLIS (*regarding her closely again*). But what about those who have not been happily married? Must they also be faithful to the memory of their husbands, even though those husbands may have ill-treated them?

RANI (*rising slowly from the settee*). For them there is the consolation of loyalty to their family, fidelity to the interests of their clan, or of service in the cause of their *raj*. It is these objects that I now live for, Major Sahib; and it is on this account that I have wished to talk with you alone.

MAJOR ELLIS (*also rising*). I shall be happy to help you to the best of my ability, Rani Sahiba—provided it is within my power to do so. . . . I understand and appreciate your sentiments.

RANI (*speaking with controlled emotion*). Major Sahib, I have a feeling that you can be trusted. I shall, therefore, speak to you quite candidly. When I insisted on seeing

piling up near the screen. The MAJOR seats himself with a flop, at which all three, especially GANGA BAI, burst out laughing. GANGA BAI then removes herself to the far side of the room, taking with her the small silver hookah, which she lights and smokes in temporary solitude, her back turned towards the other two. The curtains of the screen remain drawn aside during the rest of the scene.)

RANI (*after sitting pensively for a little while*). Major Sahib, does the great White Queen ever feel lonely?

MAJOR ELLIS (*taken aback*). I have never given the matter a thought, Rani Sahiba; but I suppose, like everyone else, our good Queen Victoria feels solitary at times, although she has been happily married for more than thirteen years now.

RANI. They say that she is devoted to her husband. Do you think she would marry again if her present lord were to die? Your customs permit of widows remarrying, do they not?

MAJOR ELLIS. Yes, they do, Rani Sahiba; but that does not mean that all our women who lose their husbands try to replace them. Some English widows believe in remaining true to their past loves. Others prefer—or are compelled through circumstances—to make another venture in marriage. Perhaps the latter are more numerous than the former. (*Rather gaily*) Unmarried men—like myself—are said to have a weakness for widows; and so they say in England “Widows are dangerous.”

RANI. I suppose you have heard that there is talk going on in Calcutta about permitting Hindu widows to remarry?

MAJOR ELLIS (*looking hard at her*). Yes, I have heard of it; and I am very much interested. What do you think of the proposal?

RANI (*looking up towards the ceiling, as if arguing with herself*). It may be of use to poor women and those

whose position is of little account; but no high-caste widow of good family would dare to take a second husband, even if she felt inclined to do so. Her life would be made so miserable and she would feel such an outcaste, that she would prefer to die.

MAJOR ELLIS. Do you think, then, Rani Sahiba, that the only existence open for a widow of some social standing is complete isolation from the world?

RANI. Major Sahib, I suppose it is as difficult for you to understand our customs as it is for us to understand yours. We Hindu women are brought up in the belief that the wife is an indivisible part of the husband, without whom her life is not complete. Therefore, where a Hindu girl is blessed with a good husband, it is quite natural for her to feel that her loyalty should extend even beyond his death. Now that *sati* has been denied to her, she is compelled to search for other ways of expressing her fidelity to her dead lord. That is why I do not believe that women of the higher castes will ever want to remarry.

MAJOR ELLIS (*regarding her closely again*). But what about those who have not been happily married? Must they also be faithful to the memory of their husbands, even though those husbands may have ill-treated them?

RANI (*rising slowly from the settee*). For them there is the consolation of loyalty to their family, fidelity to the interests of their clan, or of service in the cause of their *raj*. It is these objects that I now live for, Major Sahib; and it is on this account that I have wished to talk with you alone.

MAJOR ELLIS (*also rising*). I shall be happy to help you to the best of my ability, Rani Sahiba—provided it is within my power to do so. . . . I understand and appreciate your sentiments.

RANI (*speaking with controlled emotion*). Major Sahib, I have a feeling that you can be trusted. I shall, therefore, speak to you quite candidly. When I insisted on seeing

you alone this evening, it was because I wished to put two questions to you. In the first place, I want to know why you were opposed to the late Raja nominating me as Regent of the *raj* during the minority of Kumar Anund.

MAJOR ELLIS (*staring meditatively at the floor before replying*).

Well, I may as well let you know the truth now—only you must promise not to divulge what I say. (*The RANI nods vigorously*.) It was because I felt that the Ministers were not reliable. I feared that they—together with your Father—would secure control of the *raj* for their own ends; and that they would use you as a tool to further their own purposes.

RANI. And are you still of that opinion, Major Sahib?

MAJOR ELLIS. No, Rani Sahiba, I cannot say that I am.

Perhaps—even as Ahalya Bai saved Indore—you might be able to save Jhansi.

RANI (*with an ecstatic look and religious fervour in her voice*).

Ah, Major Sahib! If I could only be worthy enough to follow in the footsteps of the holy Ahalya Bai! She is the *avatar* I worship—the *guru* whom I obey.

MAJOR ELLIS (*recalling her thoughts to earth*). And the other question, Rani Sahiba?

RANI (*looking bewildered at first and then assuming a stern demeanour*). Major Sahib, you are a trusted friend now. Therefore, let us continue speaking frankly to one another. (*Lowering her voice*) I want to know if it is possible for me to save Jhansi from the calamity that threatens by paying a price to anyone—from the Governor-General to yourself. If so, please let me know what it is and to whom it must be paid; (*raising her tone*) for I mean to save Jhansi, come what may.

MAJOR ELLIS (*drawing himself up stiffly and bowing, preparatory to departure*). Madam, you waste your time, as well as mine. We are living in a new age now; and business with the British Government is not conducted by means of bribes.

RANI (*bitterly*). Times may have changed, Major Sahib, but men are still the same. It may be that British officers do not take money for themselves these days; but the Government which they serve takes our lands and heritage instead. (*Adopting a supplicating tone*) But pardon me, Major Sahib! I did not want to offend you. Please forgive the wanderings of a poor distracted woman who is unused to the ways of the world.

MAJOR ELLIS. Madam, (*turning to face her again and speaking in formal tones*) I have already told you that I am prepared to help you to the best of my ability. What more can I do?

RANI (*in low, deliberate tones, growing more tense with emotion*). Major Sahib, I want more than your help. I want your definite promise that my Jhansi will not be torn from me. It is my life, my child, all that I have to live for. And I am going to keep it, no matter what it may cost. (*Moving close to him and looking directly into his face*) Major Sahib, you are an unmarried man; Perhaps the soft body of an undefiled Hindu widow may tempt you, if money cannot. I live only to save my Jhansi now—and for her I can sacrifice every thing.

(*They look steadily into one another's eyes for a moment, when a loud detonation is heard from the direction of the Ceremonial Balcony. They are both startled and turn their heads towards the sound. Meanwhile, GANGA BAI has rushed to the Balcony and immediately returns shouting: "The fireworks have begun!" She then goes back to the Balcony and joins in the cries of "Kumar Anund-ki-ja!" that are being raised from the courtyard below.*)

MAJOR ELLIS (*who has once more drawn himself up straight*). Madam, we English may be greedy and grasping, but we recognise high courage when we see it. Your sacrifice is unnecessary. If anything can be done to save Jhansi, you may rest assured that I shall do it.

THE RANI OF JHANSI

(He bows low and backs towards the door, bowing as he goes.)

RANI *(making two or three small salaams to him as he retires).*
Salaam, Major Sahib, salaam. You have rejected my sacrifice, but may Shiva and Vishnu and the great Brahma himself help and prosper your disinterested efforts. *(As the MAJOR goes out she turns in the direction of the Balcony.)* These sounds stir my soul with hope—and with fear.

CURTAIN

ACT II—1854

SCENE ONE

SETTING. *The Council Chamber in the South Wing of Government House, Calcutta, on the afternoon of the 1st of March, 1854. A session of the Executive Council, consisting of the GOVERNOR-GENERAL and four Ordinary Members, is about to be held. The room is wide, square and lofty. At the back are two high Venetian-shuttered windows that overlook spacious grounds, containing red-bordered lawns and a variety of tropical trees and shrubs, amongst which the gold mohurs, in full bloom, stand out prominently. A long punkah of the old hand-pulled kind dangles from the whitewashed ceiling over a polished horseshoe table. At the head of the table stands a large, comfortable, red leather chair, placed on a small wooden platform, which gives it a commanding position in regard to the other six chairs that are set—three on either side of the table—to right and left of it. Various articles of furniture and trophies recalling the perilous early days of the East India Company are to be seen on all sides. A full-length portrait of Warren Hastings faces the red chair. Quill pens, large inkstands and pads of writing-paper are placed before each of the chairs, the red one being furnished with a small table-stand also, to enable its user to write conveniently from his elevated position. There is a large pile of official papers in front of the place immediately to the right of the red chair, this being the seat of the Government Secretary, MR. J. P. GRANT. The red seat itself is reserved for the Governor-General, EARL DALHOUSIE. Viewed from the auditorium, it is on the left-hand side of the stage and presents only a side view of its occupant. To the left of the GOVERNOR-GENERAL is the seat of the Senior Member of the Council, MR. J. A. DORIN; and to the latter's left again is the seat*

of MR. FRED. JAS. HALLIDAY, an Ordinary Member of the Council. Both these seats face the auditorium almost squarely. On the right of the SECRETARY—that is, on the auditorium side of the table—is the seat of COL. JOHN LOW, a veteran of the East India Company's services, who has worked his way up to the high position of Ordinary Member of the Governor-General's Council.

COLONEL LOW is a big, florid man of the old "Anglo-Indian" type, who presents a vivid contrast to the other characters in this scene. He has all the hearty, bluff geniality of the planter and colonial of bygone days. While his clothes are cut on English lines, they are unmistakably of Indian make and material; and instead of the conventional collar and cravat favoured by the others, he wears a beautiful scarf of Indian silk arranged under his long, flowing, canary-coloured coat. Although about sixty years of age, he carries himself very well. He prefers a clean-shaven face to the side-whiskers that all the others affect; and on his head he wears a turban of canary hue. He carries a small silver hookah, at which he pulls from time to time, even when he is speaking. EARL DALHOUSIE, small, delicate and refined in appearance, is the embodiment of Victorian aristocratic tradition in public life. He has a cold, piercing look and a frigid superiority of manner. The other three men are undistinguished individually. They are representative of a type that was just emerging at that time, namely, the British official in India, averse from merging himself in the life and habits of the country and retaining as much as possible of his "European-ness" in a foreign environment. They are correctly garbed according to the English conventions of the day and are subdued in tone and manner.

The curtain goes up on Messrs. DORIN, HALLIDAY and GRANT, seated in their respective places and indulging in chit-chat before the session commences. GRANT is busy looking through papers in front of him and only raises

his head now and again to take part in the conversation. The punkah is not in use because the weather is still cool, although it is near to the hot season.

DORIN. I hope Low is not going to make an ass of himself again to-day. I warned him that His Excellency had returned, a very sick man, from Burma and that he would brook no nonsense from anybody.

HALLIDAY. I can't quite make out what Low is up to—perpetually at loggerheads with the head of the Government and making no end of trouble for all of us. I keep telling him that, if Lord Dalhousie is determined upon carrying out ideas that are close to his heart, it is no use our trying to oppose him. No one knows him better than I do. He is the sort of man that gets his way; and now that the Charter Act empowers the Governor-General to override his Councillors, he can do it constitutionally. Low will not see this, but keeps on harping about what Ellenborough and Bentinck said or what Munro and Elphinstone did. I see no sense in it—and have told him so repeatedly.

DORIN. Grant, how much more service must Low put in before he is entitled to a pension? I see no reason why he should not send in his papers, if he is so dissatisfied with the present régime out here.

GRANT. He could get a military pension immediately, as he has just turned sixty. His service in the civil department would entitle him to a gratuity, according to the number of years he had spent in civilian employment.

DORIN. Well, if he indulges in any of his pet pranks to-day, I shall tell him bluntly—in the presence of the whole Council—that if he is not in sympathy with the policy of the Government, he ought to resign. (*With a look of self-satisfaction*) I am sure Lord Dalhousie will back me if I go all out for unequivocal Cabinet unity. Besides, I object to being constantly appealed to by

Low to arbitrate between him and the Chief. I have told him often enough in private that I am not going to jeopardise my future career in England by antagonising such a big gun as Dalhousie. If Low refuses to act on the hint, it is time he were made to feel the consequences.

HALLIDAY. It is not as if there were any chance of our being able to influence the Governor. He regards his Council as being merely a machine for registering his own decisions. He can walk over us; and he always does. So what sense is there in opposing plans that are going to be put through in any event?

DORIN. We ought to be starting now, Grant. (*Looking at his watch*) How late did His Excellency say he was going to be?

GRANT (*also looking at his watch*). He said that he would come along as soon as the doctors had finished their examination. They take a very serious view of his condition; and it is quite open whether they will permit him to remain out here any longer. That is why this prolonged examination was necessary.

DORIN. What can have kept Low? He ought to have been here in time.

GRANT (*with biting sarcasm*). He is interviewing the Rani of Jhansi in one of the ante-rooms and will come along as soon as he hears that the Governor-General is on his way to the Council.

DORIN and HALLIDAY (*in amazement*). The Rani of Jhansi!

DORIN (*recovering from his surprise and speaking pompously*). And by whose authority, please, Mr. Grant?

HALLIDAY (*with a touch of anxiety*). Did His Excellency give orders that she should be present to-day?

GRANT. Don't ask me, Gentlemen! I am as much in the dark as you are. All I can tell you is that a chit was sent to me, just before I was leaving my office for this meeting, saying that Colonel Low was taking the responsibility of bringing the Rani here to-day, in

case the Governor-General or the Council may wish to interview her before a final decision is made on the Jhansi case. On my arrival at Government House, I was told that the Rani had already arrived and had been installed in one of the ante-rooms. Shortly after that Colonel Low sent word to say that he had asked the Military Secretary to keep him informed of Lord Dalhousie's movements and that he would appear in the Council Chamber just before His Excellency's arrival.

DORIN (*holding his head between his hands*). Good God! Things are going from bad to worse! What will His Excellency say when he comes to hear that a woman has been smuggled into Government House to get round him? (*Holding up his head and speaking savagely*) If anyone ever deserved to hang, it is that shameless schemer, Low. My mind is made up now. I shall throw him to the wolves without the least compunction.

HALLIDAY (*with visible anger*). It is the most brazen piece of effrontery I have ever heard of. They say that those whom the Gods would destroy they first drive mad. Low has just committed political suicide, that's all.

(*At this moment a door near the open end of the horseshoe table—on the right of the room—opens and COLONEL JOHN LOW walks in, buoyant and smiling. He pulls at his little hookah as he marches in and speaks in a big, resonant voice, with a slight Irish intonation. He stands for a little while behind DORIN and HALLIDAY—speaking all the time—and then moves round to his own seat.*)

LOW (*as he walks and pauses*). Quoi hai, you fellows! Quoi hai! You're looking very glum to-day. Wearing the proper Cabinet face, I see. H'm! Thank God that some of my ancestors were Irish. It has at least taught me this—that it is not necessary to look like mutes at a bishop's funeral in order to transact affairs of state. India was won by men who laughed and swore and looked merry

when they were in the tightest corners. To-day we imagine that the country cannot be properly governed unless high officials dress like Sunday School teachers and behave like counting-house clerks.

(He reaches his own seat by the time he finishes this tirade and flops into it—almost facing the auditorium—and with his chair skewed round in the direction of the GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S seat. After a short pause, he begins soliloquising aloud, his head sunk on his chest and his legs sprawled out in front of him. The others pretend to ignore him and keep their eyes away from his figure.)

Low *(more by way of soliloquy than conversation)*. God! What a change! Who would have thought that Dorin, by the look of him now, could have plunged into the Hughli stark naked twenty years ago and swum—regardless of mugger, sharks and river fever—all the way from Barrackpore down to Calcutta! And all for a bet—that was handed over to him at Prinsep's Ghat—with the band playing and the ladies cheering! And to think that Halliday, who fought all through the Sikh wars with Gough and was often mentioned for his bravery in the field, is the same milk-and-water fellow that feels frightened to raise his voice in Government House to-day!

HALLIDAY. Really, Low——

(HALLIDAY fidgets uncomfortably and attempts to retort, but Low goes on without noticing him.)

Low *(continuing)*. And Grant of the independent views! The most promising of Elphinstone's young men! That was brought to Calcutta specially to teach us all how to run Government Departments efficiently! What a come-down! From right-hand man to the Governor of Bombay to chief *Babu* and bottle-washer to His Excellency, the Earl of Dalhousie. Who would have believed it!

HALLIDAY *(bursting out in anger)*. I tell you, Low, all this

foolery has got to stop! And if you think you are going to cover up your imbecile action in bringing the Rani of Jhansi here to-day by all this play-acting, you're damnably well mistaken. I shall consider it my duty to inform His Excellency of the presence of this woman in Government House directly he takes his seat.

(There is a pause, during which Low slowly draws up his legs and rises with dignity from his chair, holding his hookah all the time. He turns and faces HALLIDAY; and, pulling himself up to his full height, he addresses the latter in deep significant tones. While he speaks, he fixes HALLIDAY with a steady, steely look, making him obviously feel very uncomfortable.)

Low *(speaking slowly)*. Halliday! No man ever accused John Low of cowardice without having to face the consequences. Unless you withdraw your insinuations immediately, Sir, I shall expect due satisfaction at the end of the afternoon's business.

DORIN *(testily, but a little nervously as well)*. Stop all these heroics, Low; and behave like a sensible man. Neither Halliday nor anyone else in this room intends to cast aspersions on your courage. But we do seriously have our doubts about your sanity.

Low. My sanity can await justification, Mr. Dorin, but my pride demands immediate satisfaction. Either Halliday withdraws at once or he meets me with weapons directly this session is over.

HALLIDAY *(irritably)*. Of course I withdraw, Low, if you feel like that. You ought to know me better than to think that I was doubtful of your courage. I wish you had less; you would have thought twice before bringing the Rani here, without the Governor-General's knowledge or permission. You have let us in for a most infernal row. Don't forget that we shall all be blamed for your lunacy.

Low (*still standing and looking at HALLIDAY*). Halliday! We have known one another now for almost thirty years. Can you recall a single instance when John Low allowed the responsibility for his actions to rest on shoulders other than his own?

(At this point a door on the left, behind the head of the horseshoe table, is opened by the Military Secretary to the GOVERNOR-GENERAL, who, standing to one side of the door and keeping it open with his hand, calls out: "Gentlemen, His Excellency the Governor-General is about to enter the Council Chamber." DORIN, HALLIDAY and GRANT jump to their feet with alacrity, while LOW, who is already standing, turns slowly and faces the open door. They all bow—LOW with dignity, the others rather exaggeratedly—while DALHOUSIE walks in. He gives a swift, cold nod to either side of the table, and takes his place by the red chair. They remain standing, while DALHOUSIE first bows his head as if in prayer and then lifting it, says: "I declare this session of the Executive Council open." He speaks in a thin, metallic voice, uttering his words jerkily and with more than ordinary speed. As soon as he has spoken, DALHOUSIE sits down and others follow suit. LOW sits partly facing the auditorium, but with his chair turned in the direction of DALHOUSIE. He still hugs his hookah, but does not pull at it for a while, his chin being once more sunk in his chest, as if he were deep in thought. DORIN and HALLIDAY sit upright, ready to take their cue from DALHOUSIE, who starts looking through some papers that GRANT hands to him immediately he takes his seat. GRANT remains standing till he has handed the papers to DALHOUSIE.)

DALHOUSIE. Well, Gentlemen, it looks as if the Jhansi case is the matter most urgently requiring our attention to-day. If you agree, we will take that question first.

THE RANI OF JHANSI

(DALHOUSIE looks up and the others either incline their heads or murmur "Agreed—'greed," with the exception of GRANT, who maintains an attitude of subordination throughout and only speaks when addressed directly. After glancing around, DALHOUSIE resumes his perusal of documents.)

DALHOUSIE. I see that this Jhansi matter was before the Council in December last, when I was away in Burma. No action appears to have been taken then.

DORIN. That is so, Your Excellency. I felt that the matter was one in which the Governor-General's personal responsibility was so clearly involved that we ought not to take it upon ourselves to anticipate Your Excellency's orders in the least. So we deferred making a decision until Your Excellency's return, giving instructions that the Government of India was not to be committed in any way as regards the adoption. (DALHOUSIE nods to DORIN.) I believe those orders were communicated to Major Malcolm and have been acted upon. (To GRANT) I am right, Mr. Grant, am I not?

GRANT (looking first at DORIN and then at DALHOUSIE). Yes, Sir. That is exactly how the case stands at present. We are not committed in any way to the adoption, though the local officers seem to favour the recognition of the adopted heir.

DALHOUSIE (looking at papers and then at GRANT). Perhaps, Mr. Grant, you would be good enough to recapitulate the material facts quite briefly. I see you have prepared an elaborate minute upon the case.

GRANT. Certainly, my Lord. (He takes file with a bow from DALHOUSIE and, after opening the papers, starts to speak with scarcely a look at them.) The only facts that need be considered in this case are these: In the first place it must be borne in mind that Jhansi has always been a dependent kingdom; and that we assumed exactly the same position in regard to the ruler, as the Marathas occupied when they were the overlords of the state.

made over to him with a reasonable assurance that he would not mismanage its affairs. In 1842 we appear to have come to the conclusion that the transfer to native rule could safely be accomplished.

Low (*to GRANT*). It is true, is it not, that when we returned Jhansi to Gangadhar Rao, we kept a fat slice of it for ourselves—as a permanent *quid pro quo* for a part of the expenses incurred by us in the upkeep of the Bundelkhand Legion?

HALLIDAY (*with a self-righteous air*). The Bundelkhand Legion was brought into existence expressly for the defence and protection of states like Jhansi.

Low (*sitting up and facing the others*). True, true! I am not disputing that we had a right to expect the rulers who benefited from the protection of the Legion to pay for its upkeep. But—and this is a question which many of the native rulers have been asking, not only in Bundelkhand but elsewhere—who made the valuation in respect of the services that the Legion rendered to the local rulers? Did this late Raja of Jhansi, a man of supposedly weak intellect, have any say in the matter? What is more, did Gangadhar Rao select the lands that were to be ceded to us as payment *in perpetuo* for the Legion? Or did we skim the cream off his territories and return him only what we did not feel inclined to keep for ourselves?

DALHOUSIE. Order, order! Colonel Low! You are forgetting yourself, Sir, in impugning the *bona fides* of your predecessors and colleagues. These questions do not touch the matter under our immediate notice and I will not allow them to be raised. They belong to the dead past and must be buried with the dead past.

Low (*rising. He remains standing while he speaks*). May it go upon record, my Lord, that I for one do not condone the action of my predecessors in regard to some of the native states? (*Significantly*) As ye sow, so shall ye reap! What Your Excellency has just been pleased

to refer to as the dead past may rise up to confound us some day! *(He sits down again.)*

DALHOUSIE *(sharply)*. What exactly is it that you are hinting at, Colonel Low?

Low *(slowly and gravely)*. I mean, my Lord, that in proportion as we keep faith and win the confidence of the native rulers, so we assure ourselves of our hold upon our own territories.

(DALHOUSIE gets up quickly with a gesture of impatience and, pushing his chair back, starts pacing up and down on his side of the room. He stops suddenly close to Low and addresses him in rapid, staccato tones, moving now towards him and now away from him, with short, quick movements of nervous tension.)

DALHOUSIE. Colonel Low! I admire your sentiment, but I cannot congratulate you upon your reading of the times. Do you not see, Sir, that our very presence in this country is bringing new forces into its life, regardless of our intentions? That no matter what our aims may be, we are creating new standards and satisfying age-long needs? The Mogul power failed because it could not respond to the demands that were made on it. Its rulers lacked the ability to adapt themselves to the challenging and changing requirements of the new age. We can only succeed, Colonel Low, if we pay less heed to the past and think more of the future. *(Approaching Low's chair, where he remains for a while)* These petty little states of which you are so fond, Colonel Low, what are they but centres of selfishness and misrule, blocking the path of progress and hindering the work of those who see a future vision of this land of vast opportunities? *(Sitting down and pitching his voice in a lower key)* The times cry out for co-ordination, education, system, efficiency, good communications; and unless we can supply these elements of progressive administration to this country,

our rule will be as brief as that of the Mogul. The good of the people, Gentlemen! That is my criterion; and by that I shall stand or fall. (*Looking at papers in front of him*) Let us get on with business. I am afraid we have wasted too much time in discussing generalities.

DORIN (*glad of a chance to speak*). So far as I have been able to judge the matter, Your Excellency, the principle laid down by the Court of Directors in the Satara case—and followed by us quite recently in regard to the Bhonsle succession at Nagpur—holds good. We ought to annex Jhansi—as we have a perfect right to do, granting the Rani a fairly liberal allowance to meet all her claims and satisfy her legitimate desires.

DALHOUSIE. Thank you, Mr. Dorin! Your views coincide exactly with mine. (*Looking first at HALLIDAY and then at Low*) Do either of the other Members of Council wish to say anything?

HALLIDAY (*eagerly*). I am in entire agreement with the opinion of Your Excellency and Mr. Dorin.

(*They all look at Low, who is in his characteristic attitude, plunged deep in thought.*)

DALHOUSIE (*a little irritably*). Well, Colonel Low, if you have nothing to say, I shall assume you concur in our joint opinion. In that case, all that it is necessary for me to do now is to record our agreement that Jhansi should be annexed. Later on I shall draft a recommendation to the Directors in this sense, giving our reasons in full. Mr. Grant will circulate the draft for your perusal before the final letter is despatched.

Low (*sitting up slowly and speaking deliberately*). I was ruminating on what Your Excellency said about serving the good of the people; and it struck me that perhaps it would be a wise thing if, before we decided to annex Jhansi, we tried to ascertain whether the subjects of that state would prefer to come under our rule to remaining under the control of the Rani and the adopted heir.

DALHOUSIE (*shooting up from his chair and talking in rasping accents*). Colonel Low, I must ask you once and for all time to stop these insulting insinuations—otherwise I shall feel it my painful duty to make a drastic and immediate request to the Directors concerning you.

Low (*rising slowly and bowing*). If Your Excellency means that my resignation from this Council would be demanded, I can spare Your Lordship that trouble. I have my papers in readiness here with me (*he takes out a sealed cover from the inner breast pocket of his coat and holds it up for DALHOUSIE to see*); and I am prepared to hand them over to Your Excellency immediately—but upon one condition only.

DALHOUSIE (*looking in blank amazement from Low to the others and then back to Low again*). I do not understand you, Colonel Low. Pray explain what is in your mind.

Low (*leaving his chair and coming behind GRANT'S, he speaks in tones of deep, restrained feeling*). Your Excellency! I have given forty years of my life to India; and if those who are now in charge of the administration feel that I am useless and out of date, I am prepared to take my medicine like a man and quit. But if I am to go now, Your Lordship must allow me the satisfaction of bowing myself off the stage in a manner agreeable to my honour. Hence my stipulation.

(*There is a pause, during which they all look at Low, who seems to be waiting for a sign from DALHOUSIE. The latter knits his brow and, leaving the table once more, goes up-stage to one of the large windows, where he stands looking out, keeping his back to the auditorium. Low follows him and when close to the window begins to speak again—at first in low tones, then in rising cadences.*)

Low. Your Excellency! Last evening I received a call from a young officer, whose parents were very dear friends of mine; a young fellow in the Political Department,

whom I trained myself and whose career I have watched with pride and interest. This young man, Major Ellis, who is stationed in Bundellkhand and has been in charge of the Jhansi business, took the risk of ruining his own career by coming down to Calcutta, in order to plead with me to do my best to save the state for the Rani and the adopted heir. As both the Rani and the Kumar were already in Calcutta, he brought them to see me late last night. He believes that a capital blunder will be committed if we refuse to recognise the Kumar and annex the state. Not only did he adduce convincing proof of the loyalty of the rulers of Jhansi, ever since the time of Sheo Rao Bhao; but he went on to point out a very close precedent in the neighbouring state of Orcha, where only a few years ago an adoptive heir was recognised by us in very similar circumstances. I cannot describe adequately to Your Excellency the very deep impression that was left on my mind as a result of Major Ellis's insistent appeal; and his last words to me—before he left this morning to return to his charge—were spoken with such deadly seriousness that they have been re-echoing in my mind ever since: "If we bring discredit on friendly ruling families by flouting their religious scruples in the matter of adoption, then God help us when the storm bursts."

DALHOUSIE (*turning his head round slightly, but still keeping his back to the others*). What is your specific request, Colonel Low?

Low (*moving closer and speaking with suppressed emotion*). Your Excellency! I beg of you at least to see the Rani once—even if your decision is irrevocable about the adoption. At least, Sir, let us give her the satisfaction of feeling that she has done all in her power to avert the calamity that she believes is about to overtake her. Let us also give her a chance of hearing from the lips of the highest authority in this land that there are reasons of State behind our decision, should that

decision be adverse to her; and that we are not the common thieves that our actions sometimes lead people to imagine us to be.

DALHOUSIE (*swinging round and speaking with determination*).

Very well, Colonel Low! I will see the Rani—not to be influenced by her in the least, but to try to make her understand our motives in this unpleasant affair. (*Walking towards the table*) Mr. Grant! Please ask the Military Secretary to arrange that the Rani of Jhansi be invited here for an interview at the earliest convenient date. This part of the Council's business will stand adjourned till after the interview—but only to enable me to report my conversation with the Rani. I take it we are agreed on the principle of the annexation? (DORIN and HALLIDAY *not affirmatively*.)

LOW (*coming a little way forward, towards DALHOUSIE*).

Perhaps Your Excellency could find it convenient to see the Rani now. She is waiting here in one of the ante-rooms.

DALHOUSIE (*looking up quickly from papers that he has been reading, standing at the table*). Waiting here in one of the ante-rooms?

(*There is a pause, during which DALHOUSIE looks first at GRANT, then at DORIN, and lastly at LOW, who bows his head slowly.*)

DALHOUSIE (*thrusting back his chair and striding up to LOW, whom he addresses in a voice of concentrated rage*). If you are responsible for this outrage, Colonel Low, I shall break you without mercy.

LOW (*taking out the sealed cover again and handing it to DALHOUSIE*). I have broken myself already, Lord Dalhousie—and not my official self only, but my heart into the bargain.

(DALHOUSIE *snatches the cover away from LOW and goes to the window again, where he stands looking out, while he tries to concentrate his thoughts on the right course of action to pursue. Meanwhile,*

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DORIN and HALLIDAY, who have risen from their seats, walk over to LOW. The former grips one of LOW's hands in his own, while the latter puts one of his arms around LOW's shoulders. After a short pause, DALHOUSIE turns round quickly and, as he walks towards his desk, tears up the sealed cover.)

DALHOUSIE (turning to GRANT, who has been standing by his chair at the table, and speaking in a rasping voice). Summon the Rani, Mr. Grant. The session is adjourned.

(As DALHOUSIE speaks these words, LOW breaks down on HALLIDAY's shoulder.)

CURTAIN

SCENE TWO

SETTING. *The same as in Scene One. Time: five minutes later.*

There are present EARL DALHOUSIE, *the RANI OF JHANSI, ANUND RAO, and MR. GRANT, the Government Secretary. DALHOUSIE is seated in his chair, which, being turned away from the horseshoe table and pulled well forward, gives a full view of its occupant from the auditorium. His two hands are placed on ANUND RAO's shoulders and he is looking with kindly eyes into the boy's face. The latter is standing quite close to the red chair, which, being raised, enables the upper part of DALHOUSIE's body to be seen above ANUND RAO's figure. The RANI is in the seat previously occupied by GRANT; but the chair is pushed back from the table and is so situated in relation to DALHOUSIE's position that it presents an almost three-quarters view of the RANI's face, which is partially obscured by a very thin white gauze veil that hangs loosely on all sides and reaches down below her waist. The RANI still wears her widow's sari, with white trousers; but her body is swathed in a magnificent black-and-gold shawl and she has ornate gold embroidered shoes of Persian design on her bare feet. ANUND RAO is dressed in the ceremonial robes of a young Hindu prince and has a small tulwar stuck into his cummerbund. GRANT has taken up a position at the open end of the horseshoe table, where his papers are piled up in front of him. He is busily engaged in making notes from the files and only gives an occasional glance in the direction of the others. As the curtain goes up, DALHOUSIE is seen addressing ANUND RAO.*

DALHOUSIE (*to ANUND RAO, in kindly tones*). And so you are learning to be a swordsman and how to handle a horse?

(ANUND RAO, *who is too shy to speak, nods his head vigorously.*)

DALHOUSIE (*smiling*). Show me how you can wield your *tulwar*.

(ANUND RAO *steps away from the red chair and makes a few feints and passes with his tulwar.*)

DALHOUSIE (*still smiling*). Very good indeed! Now come here and tell me how far you have got with your reading and writing.

(ANUND, *having put his tulwar back in his cummerbund, looks inquiringly at the RANI and makes no reply.*)

RANI. My Lord! That will come later. One who hopes to become a ruler must first learn something about the principal occupation of a ruler. He will always be able to hire men to do his reading and writing for him, but unless he can do his own fighting, he will be flung aside and be displaced.

DALHOUSIE (*sitting back and speaking in a musing tone*). Madam! Do you know that my own ancestors were brought up in that same belief; and that a little more than a hundred years ago men of my family, who were rulers of a small state—not quite as large as Jhansi, but like your rajas owing allegiance to no one except their overlords, the Kings of Scotland—were fighting against the English?

RANI (*taken aback*). Are you not English, then?

DALHOUSIE (*smiling*). Certainly not, Madam! I serve the English King, who also happens to be the King of my own country, Scotland. I am no more an Englishman, because of my complexion and the flag I salute, than your Maratha ancestors were Moslems, because of the colour of their skins and the fact that they were sometimes compelled to acknowledge the Moguls as their rulers.

RANI (*lowering her voice and looking at GRANT, who has his head down*). This gentleman here—is he English?

DALHOUSIE (*laughing*). Oh, Mr. Grant? He is Scottish like myself. You see, when we Scots realised that it was

much more profitable to work for the English King than to fight against him, we took service wholesale under the English flag—determined to get the best out of the bargain. To-day, men from Scotland are to be found occupying responsible positions wherever the English Government has authority—as fighting-men, as men who look after the revenues and are in charge of civil business, as men of the law and of medicine, (*with lowered voice*) as men of God and teachers of the young.

RANI (*perplexedly*). Is Low Sahib then of the same origin as yourself and this gentleman (*indicating GRANT*)?

DALHOUSIE (*speaking faster, as if to brush the question aside*). Oh, no, no! Colonel Low's people, I believe, came to England from another country quite close but very different from both it and my own country. His country's name is Ireland; and the people there are still not very friendly to the English, although many of them serve the English King, in the same way as the Scots do.

RANI (*bursting out, as she jumps up from her chair*). Then you and Low Sahib, my Lord, are no better than Jai Singh and the other Hindu rajas who used to take service under the Moguls against their Hindu brother rulers.

DALHOUSIE (*rising slowly and walking to the window on his side of the room, where he turns and speaks, reclining wearily against the woodwork*). Madam, if you are patient, I will relate to you an incident from my family history, which may have some bearing on what you have just said. (*He signs to the RANI that she should resume her seat, which she does.*) As I have already told you, Rani Sahiba, my ancestors spent all their energies fighting the English—our family lands being near the difficult borderland that separates Scotland from England. On one occasion, after Scotland had been invaded by a mighty English army, a previous Dal-

housie, who had been driven by the English to take refuge with his men in some caves, sallied out when the English were unprepared and took back a famous fortress from them. He was rewarded by the Scottish King of that time by being put in charge of the fortress that he had captured and of the surrounding country. Now it happened that this very fortress had for generations been looked upon with covetous eyes by a powerful Scottish family, who felt aggrieved when my ancestor was appointed to the office of warden. It was not long before they vented their displeasure upon my unfortunate predecessor. He was besieged, taken prisoner and eventually died in captivity from starvation. (*Advancing towards the RANI*) The moral of this story, Madam, is just this: that one can suffer quite as much from one's friends as from one's enemies; and that when people live principally for fighting, they are just as ready to attack those who belong to their own side as they are to meet the foe. (*He leans on the red chair without sitting down as he finishes speaking.*)

RANI (*springing up from her seat again*). Lord Dalhousie! You have got to fight—if you wish to keep secure what is dear to you. Didn't your ancestors ever fight to get back lands that belonged to them?

DALHOUSIE (*smiling*). They did, Rani Sahiba; but later on, together with all the other lords and chieftains of Scotland, they lost their independence and became mere titled landowners—subjects of the King like anyone else and with no special privileges, except such as their exalted traditions and abilities were able to earn for them.

RANI (*going closer to DALHOUSIE and speaking with emotion*). My Lord! You cannot expect the rulers of Jhansi to become mere landowners. Our pride would not allow it!

DALHOUSIE (*straightening himself and in dignified tones*). Rani Sahiba! I admire your courage in coming to see

me here alone to-day and your frankness of expression. But I will not concede for a moment that the pride of a Dalhousie is in any way inferior to the pride of a ruler of Jhansi. My fathers ruled a few hundred acres of land and were justly proud of their independence. I, their descendant, who rule this vast land of Hindustan that is twelve times the size of England and Scotland taken together, have much greater cause for satisfaction. Yet I feel it a great honour to serve my King and to be his loyal subject.

RANI (*goes back to her seat crestfallen and speaks despondently*).

My Lord! What you say may be very true for you white people, but it cannot help Kumar Anund at Jhansi. If the *raj* is annexed, what will become of him? How will he maintain the dignity of the Jhansi ruling family and perform properly the ceremonies which our customs impose upon a faithful son?

DALHOUSIE (*sitting down suddenly*). Come here, please, Kumar Sahib.

(ANUND RAO *gets up from the floor near the RANI's chair—where he has been sitting during the conversation between the RANI and LORD DALHOUSIE—and stands before the GOVERNOR-GENERAL once again. DALHOUSIE places his hands on the boy's shoulders for the second time and gazes into his face. He then turns his head in the RANI's direction and—removing his hands from ANUND RAO—rests his head wearily on one of them, while the other hangs limply beside him. ANUND RAO steps back as soon as DALHOUSIE takes away his hands and after a little uncertainty sits down on the floor near DALHOUSIE, keenly watching the latter's face while he is speaking.*)

DALHOUSIE (*with suppressed emotion that now and then betrays deep anguish of mind*). Madam! It may sound strange to you to hear me say it, but I would give anything to change places with you! Yes, the Governor-

Generalship for your widowhood! I know you have had your deep affliction recently and that you are still crushed by the loss of your husband, the late Raja Gangadhar. But, Rani Sahiba, if I may be pardoned for saying so, your troubles have hit you from the front; and you were, in a sense, prepared for what was going to happen. My adversities, Madam, have struck me from behind; and I know not yet what further sorrows may not be in store for me. Less than a year ago my sainted wife left me to return to Scotland, because she could not stand this trying climate. She was almost six months on the high seas, suffering terrible agonies without a murmur; and then she died practically within sight of our homeland. Now my two daughters, whom I have not seen for years, are motherless; and the son that I was praying to be born to me some day cannot now bring me the consolation that may have eased my burdens. My health is shattered and everything that made me love life seems to have gone. I am a very sick and lonely man, Rani Sahiba.

(DALHOUSIE pauses in a state of great mental and physical weariness. He then braces himself by an effort and, springing to his feet, faces the RANI, who has risen from her chair and is gazing at him with eager, expectant eyes. He takes a few steps towards her and speaks rapidly, as if anxious to deliver himself of what he has to say and then to be gone.)

DALHOUSIE *(jerkily and under the stress of deep inward feeling)*. Madam! I know what you would ask of me, but it is impossible! I would refuse a similar request to my own brother, if he were standing in your place. Jhansi must follow Satara and Nagpur, Rani Sahiba. It is a question of principle and I am unable to make any exceptions. We have got to think of the future, Madam. The lesser must make way for the greater!

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(Here the RANI embraces ANUND RAO, who has left his position near DALHOUSIE; and begins to weep over him.)

DALHOUSIE. But do not let this distress you, Rani Sahiba! You may rest assured that everything will be done to make the change of status as little unpleasant as possible. You will be provided with a handsome allowance to meet all your obligations and to bring up the Kumar in a manner befitting his station in life. He will still be the heir to all the late Raja's private property; and you will be allowed to retain the Palace and its grounds for your own use and the Jhansi Family's. Think of all the worry and trouble you will be saved, Madam! Ruling is a thankless task and you ought to be glad to be relieved of it. You will be able to devote all your time to the Kumar's education. Who knows what greatness may not be in store for him in after-years, if he becomes a studious, hard-working young man? You could even send him to England for some of his later studies. I would always be happy to help you to secure the best training possible for him, no matter where I might be. *(Turning to the door on his side of the room)* And now, if you will excuse me, Rani Sahiba, I will take my leave of you. I am feeling far from well and the doctors have forbidden me to do too much. *(Indicating GRANT)* Mr. Grant here will go into the question of your allowance more fully and will be glad to listen to anything you may have to say in that connection.

RANI. I have nothing to say, my Lord. When you told me that the Gods had punished you, I knew that they had ordained that the crime must follow.

(DALHOUSIE bows low to the RANI and turns to leave. He stops suddenly and then goes up to ANUND RAO, who is looking at him sideways, although still clutched to the person of the weeping RANI. The GOVERNOR-GENERAL places his hand

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on the boy's head and speaks in significant tones to him, the RANI'S head being bowed and turned away.)

DALHOUSIE (to ANUND RAO). Kumar Sahib! Although you will have to lose Jhansi, let it be your ambition to attain to something far bigger in later years.

(DALHOUSIE then hurries away. The RANI remains sobbing; and ANUND RAO, who has escaped from the RANI'S grip, stands in wonderment, looking at the departing figure of the GOVERNOR-GENERAL. GRANT, who has been standing silently throughout DALHOUSIE'S final speech, now approaches the RANI in a solicitous manner.)

CURTAIN

ACT III—1857

SCENE ONE

SETTING. *The Durbar Room at the Jhansi Palace, on the morning of June 5, 1857. The appearance of the room is much the same as in Act I, Scene Three, except that the ruler's gadi is no longer in evidence. The RANI's settee occupies the centre of the room and is turned towards the auditorium. There is the same display of silver hookah, cushions, etc., as in the earlier scene. A large hand-mirror, as well as a delicate Indian fan, can also be seen, resting on the settee. A cuscus tatty has been let down over the entrance to the Ceremonial Balcony, to keep out the summer glare and heat.*

In the background, to the right and seated on the Persian carpet, are ANUND RAO and an elderly Hindu PUNDIT. They sit cross-legged, facing one another across a moderately wide but low wooden table, on which Indian lesson books and writing materials can be discerned. ANUND RAO is rocking himself to and fro—Indian fashion—learning Sanskrit verses by heart. The PUNDIT is poring over a large tome of Sanskrit literature; and from time to time he interrupts his reading to put a question to ANUND RAO or to hear the latter recite. A constant but gentle hum arises from these two. The RANI can be seen on the left, well to the fore, so that the settee almost intervenes between her and the place where the others are seated. She is pacing up and down in a state of great agitation. During the earlier part of the scene ANUND RAO and the PUNDIT remain absorbed in what they are doing and are oblivious of what is going on around them.

Soon after the curtain rises GANGA BAI rushes into the room, but seeing ANUND RAO and the PUNDIT, she halts in indecision. She then hurries silently to where the RANI is secretly awaiting her and speaks excitedly in loud whispers.

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GANGA BAI (*going close to the RANI*). Sister! The Mutiny has begun! A *havildar* with fifty *sepoys* has seized the magazine. And they say that the rest of the Company's troops will soon join in.

RANI (*pacing to and fro and speaking in low tones of suppressed feeling*). The fools! At last they have listened to the ravings of that madman, Bakshish Ali! It won't be long now before he throws open the doors of the jail—and then God knows what will happen!

GANGA BAI. Let us fly while there is yet time! Who knows what these enraged *sepoys* will do when they finally break away from discipline? Already people are speaking about the ugly things that will happen.

RANI (*stopping her perambulation and speaking sternly*). Shame on you, Ganga Bai! Your talk is unworthy of one who claims to be descended from royal Maratha stock. You may leave, if you wish; but I stay where my duty is. Only jackals fly when danger is about!

GANGA BAI (*flinging herself prostrate at the RANI's feet*). Forgive me, Sister! And may my tongue be cut out of my mouth before ever I repeat such shameful words! But it was not through cowardice I spoke, O my Princess. I was only thinking of what would be the most prudent course for you to adopt in these troublous times. After all, if the Company's troops mutiny it is no concern of ours. And it may be wisest for us to go away—and return when either one side or the other has gained the upper hand.

RANI (*going wearily to settle and reclining*). Ganga Bai! You tire me with your worldly wisdom; and although you are clever, you show little knowledge of the innermost workings of the heart. Do you think it possible for one who loves Jhansi as I do to leave it just when it is most in need of protection? Does a man run away from the house which has sheltered his family for generations, when a fire has broken out in one of the rooms;

or does he not stay behind and do his best to prevent the whole building from burning?

GANGA BAI (*following the RANI to settee and massaging her feet*). But, Sister! If the Company put down these mutineers, the English officers will blame the prominent people of Jhansi who remained behind for instigating the *sepoys* to rebel. If the mutineers are successful, they will want to set up a *raj* of their own, with a Mussulman soldier at the head. Therefore, if you stay here you are bound to lose both your allowance and your rightful position as Rani.

RANI (*sitting up*). Stop! Stop! Ganga Bai! You must not put these disturbing ideas into my mind! With you telling me to run away—and my father and the Dewan urging me to go over to the *sepoys*—and Maharaja Scindia sending me pressing messages to remain loyal to the English, my head is bursting. (*Looking in the direction of ANUND RAO*) If it were not for Anund, I think I would take my own life and end all this worry. I have had little sleep since the news of the revolt at Meerut reached us three weeks ago. And now that the outbreak seems to have spread to Jhansi, I suppose there will be no rest for us all for a very long time to come. (*After a pause, she suddenly stands up and speaks directly to GANGA BAI*) Sister, please run and find my father! He is bound to know the latest news. Hurry, Sister! I feel I ought to do something before it is too late! Although I am only a Rani in name now, people still respect me and will listen to what I say.

(*As GANGA BAI is rushing to the door, MAMA SAHIB enters, followed by NARA SINGH, the late Dewan. GANGA BAI stands aside while they enter and looks at them very closely. She then passes out of the room, giving the RANI a very significant glance. The entry of the two men causes ANUND RAO to look up, but the PUNDIT keeps on reading from his tome unconcernedly.*)

MAMA SAHIB (*with forced gaiety*). Glad tidings, Daughter! The rule of the Maratha will be established once more in Jhansi! The *sowars* of the Company's cavalry have decided to join the *sepoys* in their revolt.

NARA SINGH. Havildar Gurbaksh is already in possession of the magazine, Madam; and the jail *daroga*, Bakshish Ali, is ready to release the prisoners as soon as the signal is given.

RANI (*stiffly*). I am astonished at you, Dewan Sahib; and at you also, Father! I should have thought you two would have been the last to countenance the breaking of their oath of loyalty by soldiers, no matter to whom that loyalty was due.

NARA SINGH. In ordinary circumstances, Madam, I would certainly have hesitated to support men who were being disloyal to their masters. But these *sepoys*, Rani Sahiba, have just grounds for their action. Among other causes for their disaffection is the supreme one of religious principle. The English have offended their most cherished scruples.

RANI (*with scarcely veiled sarcasm*). And are you taking their side for religious reasons, Dewan Sahib?

MAMA SAHIB (*impatiently*). Yes, Daughter, for religious reasons. Because reasons of state are very often as sacred as reasons of faith.

NARA SINGH. That is my answer, too, Rani Sahiba. The Mussulmans feel that the English have defiled their sacred beliefs; and we Hindus feel that the English have robbed us of our sacred rights of adoption and inheritance. It is the will of God that the chance of redress should be offered us jointly and at the same moment.

RANI (*continuing in sarcastic vein*). Dewan Sahib! You were not so very eager three years ago to oppose the English. What has made you change your attitude towards them now?

MAMA SAHIB. Don't be too hard on him, Daughter! We

were all misled at that time, except yourself. The English fooled us then, as they have always fooled the people of Hindustan.

NARA SINGH. Madam! If you only knew how bitterly I regret my stupidity you would sympathise with me! For I was acting entirely in your own interests in suggesting that all claims to the *gadi* should be abandoned in exchange for an adequate pension. When subsequently I learned that one of the conditions of the allowance was that you should pay the debts of our late revered master, I could have dashed my brains out for the blind faith which I reposed in Major Ellis's smooth words.

RANI (*laughtily*). Spare your regrets, Dewan Sahib! I do not in the least mind having to meet these obligations that have been forced on me by the English. They were debts of honour and I would prefer to starve rather than allow a single creditor of the Jhansi *raj* to remain unsatisfied. (*Sternly*) And please leave Major Ellis out of the business. He did more to keep Jhansi in our hands than the whole lot of you put together.

MAMA SAHIB (*interposing*). We are wasting time, Daughter! It will soon be necessary for you to proclaim the new Jhansi *raj*—with yourself as Regent and Kumar Anund as future ruler. Make everything ready, therefore, against the signal. We are in touch with the *sepoys* leaders; and they have promised to support the new *raj* as soon as it has been set up.

RANI (*drawing herself up and speaking with determination*). I take no orders, either from you, Mama Sahib, or these mutinous *sepoys*. The British are still in authority. I prefer not to take sides in this quarrel between them and their servants.

MAMA SAHIB (*angrily*). You are still repeating like a parrot what Scindia and his crafty dewan, Dinkar Rao, have taught you. I tell you that the circumstances are quite different here from what they are at Gwalior and

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MAMA SAHIB (*angrily*). You are still repeating like a parrot what Scindia and his crafty dewan, Dinkar Rao, have taught you. I tell you that the circumstances are quite different here from what they are at Gwalior and

Indore. We have no troops of our own to rely on, as Scindia and Holkar have. Therefore we must come to terms with whatever side is likely to win. It is more than three weeks now since the *sepoys* at Meerut rebelled and the upheaval is spreading in all directions. Soon there will not be a single English person in authority anywhere in Hindustan. We must act quickly, if we wish to keep our position intact in all the turmoil that is already showing itself.

RANI (*settling herself on settlee*). I refuse to be hurried. It is too early now to say what is going to happen. Dinkar Rao knows what he is talking about. The English always start fighting badly, but they have big resources across the seas, which they can bring over in their ships. I shall have the Palace doors locked and guarded; and we must all remain indoors till this storm has blown over. (*To ANUND RAO, who has risen to his feet and is staring with wide-open eyes at MAMA SAHIB*) Anund! Go on with your studies, please! There is nothing for you to get excited about.

MAMA SAHIB (*moving towards the RANI in a towering rage*). "Go on with your studies!" "Go on with your studies!" You are a bigger fool than I took you for! Trying to carry out the false notions of that arch-thief, Lord Dalhousie—you, who pretended to be a genuine Maratha woman! (*Turning towards ANUND RAO, who shrinks away*) "Go on with your studies!" When you ought to be preparing to fight for your rights! (*Going up to the low, wooden table, he kicks it over. ANUND RAO runs to the RANI, who is sitting bolt upright; and the meditative PUNDIT falls over on to his side, looking bewildered.*) "Go on with your studies!" When the Mussulmans will soon be in control of Jhansi and one of their own leaders will very likely be made ruler!

(MAMA SAHIB goes out of the room kicking things out of his way and shouting, mockingly, "Go on with your studies." "Go on with your

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studies." The curtain falls on the RANI sinking back on her settee, with one of her arms around ANUND RAO, who has partly buried his face against her, but is also trying to watch MAMA SAHIB stealthily. The DEWAN, having kept himself in the background during MAMA SAHIB'S outburst, follows the latter out, after making a deep salaam to the RANI and ANUND RAO.)

CURTAIN

SCENE TWO

SETTING. *The same as in Scene One: the evening of June 7, 1857. The cuscus tatty has been drawn up and can be seen—rolled—over the entrance to the Balcony. The RANI is reclining on her settee, fanning herself; and ANUND RAO is seated on the floor, close to the settee, looking up at her with an earnest, troubled look on his face. GANGA BAI is in the background, sewing a garment and looking out from time to time through the Balcony entrance. The low, wooden table can be seen on the right, piled with books and writing materials.*

ANUND RAO. But why don't we join the *sepoys*, Rani Mother, and kill off these English? There are only a few of them holding out in the citadel.

RANI. Son! I have told you often enough that it is dangerous for people to become rulers at the instigation of mutineers. If you reach the *gadi* by treachery, you are likely to lose it by treachery also.

ANUND RAO. But in the old days, Rani Mother, you would always make me do my *tuhwar* exercise! If we do not attack the English now, when will we ever get a chance of winning back Jhansi?

RANI (*sitting up and speaking with spirit*). If the *raj* of the Peshwas was being rebuilt and an organised Maratha army was in the field, my Son, I would not hesitate to strike at the English. That would be a holy war for us and I would gladly risk the last *cowrie* in my purse and even my very life upon such a noble cause. (*Speaking dispiritedly as she falls back on settee*) But that prospect is not before us now, Son. A mere rabble of rebellious *sepoys* cannot build up a *raj* that will satisfy us Marathas. We will lose the little that we have got, if we throw in our lot with these mad Mussulman servants of the Company.

ANUND RAO. But Mama Sahib says that the English will all be killed and that we must help the *sepoys* now, or they will not give Jhansi back to us.

RANI (*jumping up and pacing to and fro angrily*). Mama Sahib is like all men—just thinking of what he can secure for himself and heedless of the desires or convenience of others. He sold me first to Raja Gangadhar; then he helped to sell me to the English; and now he wants to sell me to these *sepoys*. But I will not be sold again. Maharaja Scindia is right. This revolt is no concern of ours. We have more at stake than anyone else and we must remain neutral. If Mama Sahib—

GANGA BAI (*rushing up and interrupting*). Sister! I have just seen Rao Appa rush across the courtyard and enter the Palace. His clothes were badly torn and he looked as if he had been in a desperate struggle. I hope he is not the bearer of bad news.

RANI (*sitting down calmly on the settee*). The daughters of the Maratha must always be prepared for bad news, Ganga Bai. Go and let Rao Appa in! (*To ANUND RAO, still sitting on floor*) Come and stand near me, Son! From now onwards you must take a share in whatever befalls Lakshmi Bai. I have a feeling that our days of happiness are ended.

(ANUND RAO rises and, after being embraced by the RANI, takes up a standing position beside her. GANGA BAI, who has been peering round the door, now pulls it wide open. RAO APPA enters, hysterical and badly shaken, with his garments torn and his hair dishevelled. He is without a turban and is altogether a sorry spectacle. Casting himself at the feet of the RANI, he bursts out crying, at the same time beating his forehead against the carpeted floor.)

RANI (*bending over from the settee and patting RAO APPA on the shoulder*). A Maratha warrior does not need to cry for the troubles that are being heaped on his Rani's

head, Rao Appa. Tell me what has happened! I am prepared for all things now.

RAO APPA (*between sobs*). Madam! I do not cry for fear of what is going to happen, but for very shame at the conduct of men who call themselves soldiers and have eaten the salt of the Jhansi *raj* for many, many years.

RANI. You cannot be speaking of the Palace guards? Only this morning they took the most solemn oaths to stand by me, no matter what it may cost them.

RAO APPA (*beating his forehead on the floor once more*). Alas, Madam! They have all deserted and gone over to the mutineers—partly because they were threatened with poison in their food if they remained loyal to you, and partly because big rewards were promised them if they joined the *sepoys*.

RANI (*standing up in suppressed rage*). In whose name were these threats and promises made?

RAO APPA In the name of Bakshish Ali, the jail *daroga*, Madam! This man has struck fear and terror into the whole population, ever since the release of the criminals. People say that he has become quite insane; and that he foams at the mouth and uses terrible imprecations if anyone dares to show the least sign of sympathy with the besieged English. He declares that he has been given a mission by God to purge Hindustan of white people.

RANI. What do the leaders of the *sepoys* say to this mad-man's ravings?

RAO APPA They are quite powerless to restrain him, Madam! His influence over the worst elements of the mob is very great and the military men are unwilling to oppose him, for fear of provoking disorders in the town. It was he, Rani Sahiba, that set people on to beat and even kill me, when I went after the guards, trying to persuade them to return.

RANI (*sitting down with a gesture of resignation*). I suppose it will not be long now before the *sepoys* come and dig

out our two siege guns from the courtyard hollows. The guards are bound to tell them where they are hidden. Once our guns are used against the citadel walls, the English will either be compelled to surrender or to submit to certain death. God's purpose must take its course, I suppose!

RAO APPA (*standing up*). Madam! A shameful thing happened when I was in the hands of the mob, almost despairing of my life. Three Englishmen were discovered, dressed as Mussulmans, making their way here, to seek your assistance for the besieged. When their disguise was removed, they were recognised as English officials who had taken refuge in the citadel and were being very prominent in its defence. (*Turning away his face and putting his hands over his eyes*) They were butchered under my very eyes by some of Bakshish Ali's ruffians, as a warning to others who might desire to communicate with you. (*After a pause and further shuddering*) I escaped in the confusion that followed the killing of the Englishmen.

(*Here the RANI rises from the settee with quick, nervous movements and, striking her chest with her clenched fists, paces up and down, shaking her head from side to side as she speaks in anguished tones.*)

RANI. Now, indeed, do the clouds begin to gather. Once blood is spilt, no man can tell the end.

(*A low murmuring, which has been growing louder and louder during the last two speeches, now bursts out into a full-throated roar. It is the crowd in the courtyard that has come, under the leadership of BAKSHISH ALI, to look for the hidden guns. The roar signifies that the guns have been discovered. Thereafter the resounding voice of BAKSHISH ALI can be heard above the general noise, thundering out curses and defiance against the RANI. The crowd re-echo some of his imprecations and cheer him on. Inside the Durbar Room there is bewilderment at*

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first, which is interrupted by ANUND RAO bursting into tears and rushing to the RANI, with his hand over his ears and his face held downwards. The RANI bends over him and caresses him for a moment. She then recovers herself with an effort and, beckoning to RAO APPA, signals to him that he should remove the boy. Meanwhile GANGA BAI has stolen cautiously up to the entrance to the Balcony. Keeping herself out of view from below, she peeps into the courtyard. The noise of the crowd subsides for a while and BAKSHISH ALI's booming voice can be heard distinctly and in challenging tones. RAO APPA and the boy halt as soon as the voice compels attention, the latter still whimpering but otherwise quiet.)

VOICE OF BAKSHISH ALI. Where is this harlot, this ungodly, idolatrous and shameless woman, who dares to shield the infidel from our wrath? Bring her out and I will kill her with my own hands. All friends of the English are our enemies! Bring her out, I say, or we will set fire to this den of iniquity! Allah has entrusted me with the holy task of ridding Hindustan of all its pests and vices. Therefore, I say, bring her out, or you shall all be slain! *(His voice subsides amidst the general uproar outside.)*

RANI *(as if determined on a course of action)*. Rao Appa! Take this squealing rat *(indicating ANUND RAO)* and hide him in a hole somewhere! He is neither a true Maratha nor a worthy representative of a ruling family!

(RAO APPA turns towards the door, leading ANUND RAO by the hand. Suddenly the boy wrenches himself free and rushes across to the RANI, clasping her person in his small arms.)

ANUND RAO. Please do not send me away, Rani Mother! I promise to do my best not to cry. I am not frightened to die with you, only I cannot help the tears coming. Let me stay, Rani Mother, please! I am not crying

now—see! (*Looking up at her.*) And even if I do cry, it does not mean that I am frightened. I am a Maratha warrior and I know how to face the enemy bravely!

(*The RANI bends down, kisses and embraces the boy and then signs to RAO APPA that he should stay in the room, but far away from the Balcony side.*)

GANGA BAI (*in a loud whisper, still maintaining her watch near the Ceremonial Balcony*). They are taking away the guns! The guards are helping them! They have found some cannon shot and rifle ammunition also. Everything is being taken away. The guards are showing the people how the cannon are loaded. They are removing the guns now. But Bakshish Ali and some of his followers are coming towards the Palace again. He is going to give us some more of his filthy abuse.

Voice of BAKSHISH ALI. Bring her out, the harlot! Bring her out! We wish to kill her. She is in league with the English, who have defiled our holy religion and insulted our self-respect. Bring her out; otherwise it will go ill with all of you in this accursed place!

(*While these words are being said, the RANI arranges her sari and peeps at herself in the hand mirror. She then proceeds towards the Ceremonial Balcony. GANGA BAI and RAO APPA move forward as if to restrain her, but she waves them off and passes through the doorway leading to the Balcony. While there, she is completely hidden from view, though her voice can be heard.*)

RANI (*on the Balcony*). Here I am, O Bakshish Ali, ready—nay, glad—to die, if my beloved people desire my death! But remember this, jail *daroga*, for every single friendly act that I may now wish to do for the English, you have done twenty in the past! You have fawned upon them, licked their feet like a dog and done their dirty work for them on numberless occasions. These very men that are running at your heels like a pack of street curs have all suffered at your hands. Let

them and the rest of the people of Jhansi decide between us! If the poor that I have clothed, the hungry that I have fed, the mendicants that I have given alms to and the criminals that I have pardoned, want my blood, they can shed it. I shall submit without a murmur. But if they do not seek my life, then let them choose you, Bakshish Ali, for a victim (*There is a pause, during which a faint rumble of lowered voices can be heard.*) What! Do you find it difficult to make up your minds? Very well, then! I shall go within and wait. If you want me, I shall be glad to come back and do your bidding. If the people of Jhansi prefer jail *daroga* Bakshish Ali to Rani Lakshmi Bai, then indeed it is fitting that Rani Lakshmi Bai should die!

(While the RANI is making her speech on the Balcony, MAMA SAHIB, with drawn tulwar, and NARA SINGH rush into the room. After halting for a moment to take in the situation, MAMA SAHIB strides towards the approach to the Balcony. GANGA BAI interposes and forces him to retreat. They all maintain attitudes of intense concentration till the speech is finished. The RANI then returns and there is a general relaxing of tension in the room. GANGA BAI resumes her post near the Balcony, while MAMA SAHIB sheathes his tulwar. The RANI flings herself on the settee with an air of utter weariness. After a pause, GANGA BAI—looking out again—speaks, but in louder tones than before.)

GANGA BAI. He is going—with the last of his ferocious monsters. The courtyard is almost empty now. Most of the crowd went off when you defied him, Rani Sahiba. They do not love him at all, but they are afraid of his cut-throat companions.

Voice of BAKSHISH ALI (*sounding farther away and less aggressive*). Listen, you shameless harlot! We will spare you for the present, till we have disposed of your English friends. After that we will deal with you!

In the meantime, if you make the slightest effort to help the infidels, we will kill you without mercy—and feed the vultures with your flesh! So beware! For I, Bakshish Ali, have spoken! I have had guards placed all round this building; and nothing that you do will escape my notice.

MAMA SAHIB. Did you notice the change in his voice? You have cowed him, Daughter. He will not trouble us much longer. As soon as the Jhansi *raj* is proclaimed, we shall know how to handle him (*He looks with meaning at the DEWAN.*) For the present we can ignore him. (*To RANI*) I bring you good news, Daughter! The standard of the Peshwas has once more been unfurled. The call has gone forth that all true Marathas should rally to the support of the Nana Sahib

RANI (*still seated*). How can the Maratha cause succeed, when the Mussulman *sepoys* are proclaiming Bahadur Shah as Emperor at Delhi?

NARA SINGH. Bahadur Shah is an old man, Madam, and he will merely serve as a symbol. The Maratha princes will be the real rulers wherever a Maratha *raj* is already in existence.

RANI Have Scindia and Holkar declared themselves as yet?

MAMA SAHIB. Not yet, Daughter. But our information goes to show that in both Gwalior and Indore events will force Scindia and Holkar to take the side of the *sepoys*.

(*A loud detonation is then heard, followed quickly by another. There is also a distant buzz of cheering. In the room, everyone is startled and the RANI sits up suddenly. She then flings herself at full length on the settee, sobbing violently and pulling at her hair, while her face is buried in the cushions. ANUND RAO rushes across to her and falls weeping at her feet. Simultaneously GANGA BAI rushes out onto the Balcony. She returns almost immediately.*)

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GANGA BAI (*placing her hands gently on the RANI'S and speaking in very sad tones*). Be calm, Sister! It is better that the walls of our citadel should be destroyed by our own guns than by the guns of an enemy.

(*The men all lower their heads in grief at the RANI'S distress, RAO APPA being very visibly affected.*)

CURTAIN

SCENE THREE

SETTING. *The same as in Scenes One and Two: nightfall on June 8, 1857. The chandelier in the Durbar Room is partly lighted; and there is a suggestion of gloom and suspense in the atmosphere. The RANI is reclining on the settee, fanning herself and looking very troubled in mind. GANGA BAI is standing at the RANI'S feet, massaging them. ANUND RAO and RAO APPA are seated at the low table where the PUNDIT presided in Scene One. They are burnishing weapons on the table, from which all books and writing materials have been removed.*

RANI (*with a sigh*). I wish I had followed your advice, Ganga Bai, and fled from all this turmoil. Then perhaps I should have had some peace of mind!

GANGA BAI (*sadly*). Ah, Sister! What is to be will be! You were meant to bear these sorrows and I to share your sufferings. It is our *dharma*. Besides, where could we have run to? The trouble seems to have spread everywhere.

RANI. That is how I keep up my courage. I go on saying to myself: "Better to face risks and dangers at home among one's own people than fly to unknown perils!"

GANGA BAI. Sister! I see more clearly now than ever before that without you there is no hope of peace coming to Jhansi again. Everyone else is seeking his own gain. You alone are trying to save Jhansi and her people.

(A bugle is heard outside. The RANI sits up and everyone in the room becomes attentive.)

RANI. It must be the *sepoys* leaders. My father threatened to bring them here to-day. Quick, Ganga Bai! Bring me my Ceremonial Shawl—the black-and-gold one! And my best slippers as well! I must face these rough men looking like a Rani at least! (GANGA BAI *slips away from the room.*) And you, Anund! Put on your *tulwar*

and breastplate. We must let these common fighting-men see what a Maratha prince looks like!

(The RANI looks at herself in the hand-mirror and adjusts her sari and hair, while RAO APPA helps ANUND RAO on with his accoutrements. GANGA BAI returns and helps the RANI to drape herself in the shawl. She then puts the slippers on the RANI's bare feet. Just as these preparations are completed, the door is flung open and MAMA SAHIB marches in, followed by NARA SINGH and two Indian officers commanding the mutineers from the 12th Regiment of Native Infantry and the 14th Irregular Cavalry respectively. The officers are JEMADAR LALL BAHADUR and RISSALDAR LALL MUHAMMAD, both on the active list of the Bengal Army, maintained by the East India Company. The former has on a bright uniform of red with white facings, cut according to the fashion of the period. He wears white leggings and has a sword dangling from a white sash, which is slung across the right shoulder. The RISSALDAR is in the white undress uniform of an Indian cavalryman—a pair of white riding-breeches, close-fitting below the knees and rather baggy above, with a long white tunic of fine material, reaching to the knees. They are finely bearded men and wear turbans, the JEMADAR's being white and the RISSALDAR's pale blue. The former has on regulation boots, but the latter wears Indian shoes with curled points. The RANI faces the entering party standing, with ANUND RAO beside her. GANGA BAI and RAO APPA retire to the background. When they are close to her, the two officers give the RANI a full right-handed salute. She raises her hand a little and makes a slight inclination of the head in acknowledgment. Thereafter she remains motionless, with her figure well drawn up and her head thrown back.)

JEMADAR (drawing a document out of his tunic). Rani

Sahiba! We are rough men and unused to the polite etiquette of palaces! Please excuse us if we offend against good taste and manners. Besides, the time is short and business of pressing importance calls us elsewhere. You will pardon me, therefore, if I proceed at once to read out the proclamation that we have drawn up in consultation with your respected Father and your esteemed Dewan. (*He reads from the document*) "The people are God's and the two religions must govern together. The country belongs to the Padishah at Delhi; and Rani Lakshmi Bai rules at Jhansi in his name." (*Handing over the document to NARA SINGH*) It is for you now, Madam, to accept our terms and have your seal affixed to the proclamation.

RANI. And what are your terms, Jemadar Sahib?

JEMADAR. As we have repeatedly told your advisers, Madam, our terms are that you furnish immediately sufficient funds to defray the expenses of our transportation—with men, animals, baggage and followers—to Delhi, that you hold Jhansi in the name of the Padishah against all attacks that may be made upon you by the English and their allies, that you maintain an adequate force for this purpose; and that you pledge yourself to come to the assistance of the Padishah's army with men, munitions and money—whenever required to do so.

RANI. And if I refuse, Jemadar Sahib?

RISSALDAR (*roughly*). If you refuse, you and your son will have to make way for another ruler. Either you accept now, or you go!

JEMADAR (*putting a restraining hand on his companion's arm*). Madam! Excuse my friend! His language is the language of the camp and of the stables—where one can secure results only by blows and curses. We wish to be fair to you, Rani Sahiba! That is why we have allowed you to put off your decision from day to day, putting full trust in your Father's promise to make

you throw in your lot with us. (*More firmly*) But the time has come, Madam, when we dare not wait any longer. As you know yourself, Jhansi is now in a state of great disorder. Ruffians, thieves and murderers are abroad everywhere; and the people are begging us incessantly to set up some responsible *raj* to check and punish evil-doing. They refuse to believe that it is not the fault of the *sepoys* that the old Jhansi *raj* has not been set up again. And they keep on saying: "If you don't want our beloved Rani Lakshmi Bai to rule, put someone else on the *gadi*."

RISSALDAR (*gruffly*). And to-morrow the position will be much worse, when the English surrender the citadel—as they have agreed to do. Unless there is someone in authority to protect them, they will all be butchered by Bakshish Ali and his villains. *We* cannot spare the time to look after them. Besides, our orders are that we should leave for Delhi immediately the citadel is taken.

MAMA SAHIB (*suavely*). Perhaps you ought to be told, Daughter, that our friends here (*indicating the officers*) have just come from an interview with Sada Sheo Rao, who, as we all know, has been intriguing against you and Anund for some time. This rascal has now grown bold and claims to be a close relative of the late Raja Gangadhar. He says that the *gadi* belongs to him in his own right.

JEMADAR. That is true, Madam. And we have just announced to Sada Sheo Rao and his supporters that unless you accept our terms at once, we shall proclaim him as ruler in your place.

(*The RANI turns her face away from her interviewers and joining her hands, palm to palm, she bows her head three times over them, moving her lips at the same time. She then turns suddenly and faces the two officers.*)

RANI. Jemadar Sahib! Before I give you my final decision, please answer one question.

JEMADAR. Ask it, Rani Sahiba.

RANI. If I set up the Jhansi *raj* again, what guarantee have I that you will not mutiny against me, as you have mutinied against the English?

RISSALDAR (*thrusting his companion aside*). I'll answer that! The only guarantee that you can have against mutiny is to treat the men who risk their lives for you properly. What have the English done for me in return for the thirty years' service I have given to the Company? When I was a young man, I rode through the country of the Afghans to Kabul with General Pollock and helped to rescue the English who had been imprisoned there. After that, I served with Napier Sahib in Sind and fought at Miani. Later, under Gough Sahib, I was in the stern struggles against the Sikh Khalsa: first at Mukdi, then at Ferozeshah, and lastly at Sobraon. After the Sikh wars I went on active service in Burma and in Sikkim. On my body I have six wounds. Two of my toes have been shot away on my left foot; and I can only hear properly with the right ear. And what have I got for it all? I have to supply myself with a horse, a groom, my uniform and part of my rations. My pay is barely enough to keep me and my family in peace-time. And whenever I go on active service I have to visit the moneylenders. My lands are all mortgaged and my wife's ornaments have to be pledged frequently. Can you tell me why I should love the English?

JEMADAR. Madam! My friend the Rissaldar Sahib has a rough tongue, but his heart is of pure gold! He is very bitter, Rani Sahiba; and so are all of us. We could forgive much, but when it came to using cartridges dipped in pigs' fat, we could stand it no longer! A professional fighter values his self-respect more than anything else!

RISSALDAR (*thrusting himself forward again*). In the days of the Padishah—and even under your own Maratha

rulers—a fighting-man who had ambition, talent and ability could become a leader of armies or the governor of a province. But what can a young *sowar* or *sepo*y hope to become now? Nothing more than what I and my friend here are—mere under-officers of the Company, struggling in debt and difficulty. The English officers become Colonels or Generals, or go into fat civilian jobs. My friend, the Jemadar Sahib, and I can only hope for a small pension—if we live to earn it! And yet it is the *sowars* and *sepoys* of the Bengal Army that have taken the Company's flag all over Hindustan!

(During the RISSALDAR'S speech a sound as of many people wailing and lamenting can be heard from the direction of the Balcony. The RANI looks once or twice at RAO APPA, who is standing near the window and trying to make out what is happening in the courtyard outside. As soon as the RANI catches RAO APPA'S eye, the latter leaves the room to investigate. Meanwhile the sound gets louder and louder, till it almost drowns the RISSALDAR'S closing words. The RANI has now fixed her gaze on the door in expectation of RAO APPA'S return. The others follow her example, after looking questioningly at one another. MAMA SAHIB makes a tentative move towards the door, when it is thrown open by RAO APPA, who stands aside and lets a number of leading townsmen rush into the Durbar Room—all panic-stricken and with horror stamped on their faces.)

J. S. no. unless him as they throw themselves prostrate before the RANI and viewers to beat their foreheads on the floor and their bows her with their hands, setting up a dismal wailing lips at the same time. The rest of the crowd outside in the faces the two officers continue their sounds of lamentation.

RANI. Jemadar Sahib! Be quieten the clamour inside the please answer one question among the townsmen and calming

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RANI (*recovering from her surprise and speaking angrily*). Rao Appa! What is the meaning of this? Have you gone mad to allow these men to intrude on my privacy in this fashion?

RAO APPA. They have terrible news to give, Rani Sahiba. I thought——

RANI (*to the townsman who is closest to her*). What is it? Speak! (*There is more wailing and beating of chests.*) Speak, I tell you! Don't be frightened! Out with it!

FIRST TOWNSMAN (*to the accompaniment of wailing*). The English prisoners, Rani Sahiba! The English prisoners! (*More sobbing and chest-beating.*)

RISSALDAR (*angrily*). Where are there any English prisoners, you fool? Let us know quickly what all this noise means or I'll flay the lot of you alive!

RANI (*speaking calmly*). Let him proceed in his own way, Rissaldar Sahib. You can question him afterwards. (*To Townsman*) Go on, friend! Tell us what you were going to say about the English prisoners?

MANY TOWNSMEN (*with wailing and chest-beating*). They have been murdered, Rani Sahiba! (*One voice only*) Brutally murdered—men, women, and children!

(*There is a tense pause, during which the RANI and the officers look in horrified amazement at one another.*)

RAO APPA (*coming forward to explain*). When the Rissaldar Sahib and the Jemadar Sahib left the neighbourhood of the fortress this afternoon, the *havildars* who were in charge of the attacking parties were visited by Bakshish Ali. They were induced to offer a safe-conduct out of Jhansi to the besieged English, if the latter agreed to lay down their arms and come out of the citadel at once. The English accepted the terms; and Bakshish Ali, being till recently in their employ, claimed the right to take charge of them as protected prisoners. He and his ruffians took the unfortunate

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men, women and children to the Jokhan Bagh. Once there, they despatched the lot, saying they were carrying out the orders of the *sepoys* leaders and the Rani.

(Groans of horror and renewed wailing break out at the end of RAO APPA'S recital. The RANI begins to move about the room in a distracted manner, tearing at her hair and beating her forehead with her clenched fists. The two officers, MAMA SAHIB, and NARA SINGH form a group, exchanging whispered comments with gravely disturbed countenances. RAO APPA continues to pacify the townsmen; and ANUND RAO, seeing that the RANI is greatly upset, goes over to GANGA BAI in the background and takes her hand as if seeking protection.)

RANI *(speaking distractedly and at first to no one in particular)*. Woe, woe, unto us all for this blood that has been shed so wickedly and wantonly! The ghosts of these murdered people will haunt us till our dying day! *(Turning on the townsmen with blazing wrath)* Out of my sight, you miserable jackals! Do you come now to inform me of this—when it is too late? Why did you not come here, you fools, as soon as you knew that the citadel was about to be surrendered by the English? Out of my sight, you idiots! Get out! Get out!

(The RANI drives the townsmen out, seizing her small hand-punkah and brandishing it at them. They rush out helter-skelter. She then turns and addresses the others in ringing, commanding tones.)

RANI. Jemadar Sahib! Your terms are accepted! From this very instant the Jhansi *raj* is born again and Rani Lakshmi Bai shall take charge of affairs on behalf of the heir, Kumar Anund. My first command is to you, Rissaldar Sahib, and to you as well, Jemadar Sahib! Go and destroy this monster, Bakshish Ali, and every single person that aided him in this horrible massacre. Have no mercy on them, but *kill* them how you can.

My financiers will meet your demands and give you all you require. Go! Do not return until you can say, "It is done." (*The RISSALDAR and the JEMADAR salute and leave.*) Dewan Sahib! Put the Seal of the *raj* to the Proclamation and go and read it to the people outside. Then send the criers in all directions, announcing that Lakshmi Bai has ascended the *gadi* as Regent and that looting and intimidation of any sort will be mercilessly punished! Let them also warn the people against harbouring Bakshish Ali and his evil associates. Their lives have become forfeit to the *raj*.

(*NARA SINGH makes a low salaam and straight-way affixes the Seal—which he has kept about his person—to the Proclamation that he has been holding in his hand. He then goes out on to the Ceremonial Balcony and can be heard reading the Proclamation to the people in the courtyard.*)

RANI. Father! You and Rao Appa must immediately enrol a Maratha guard for the Palace and then secure worthy men for our Army. Lose no time, Father. We may have to fight at any minute now!

(*Both MAMA SAHIB and RAO APPA make deep obeisance and go out. The RANI then throws out her hands to ANUND RAO, who rushes across the room from GANGA BAI and embraces her. She then places one hand on ANUND RAO'S head and, holding the other arm outstretched, takes the following oath:*)

RANI. From now onwards, I swear to be at the head of our troops, whenever they go into action! Since innocent blood has been shed to-day in Jhansi, against my wishes but in my name, I will offer myself as a ready victim, whenever danger to life and limb threatens my beloved subjects!

(*As she finishes speaking, loud shouts of "Rani Lakshmi Bai-ki-jai" break out in the courtyard, in response to the reading of the Proclamation by*

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NARA SINGH. *The curtain falls on the Rani, her arm outstretched, looking upward with serene resolve on her face, while the shouting outside gathers volume.)*

CURTAIN

ACT IV—1858

SCENE ONE

SETTING. *The courtyard of the Palace at Jhansi, below the Ceremonial Balcony, on the evening of March 3, 1858. Crowds of townspeople have assembled to welcome the RANI and her troops, on their return after three months of successful campaigning against the Raja of Orcha and his allies. The curtain goes up on an organised entertainment of snake-charming, juggling, acrobatics and pole-balancing. After a while the Dewan—NARA SINGH—appears in the courtyard through the studded door and straightway mounts a horse, which is brought forward as soon as he is seen. The townspeople, together with the few guards who are visible, raise a cry of "Dewan Sahib-ki-jai"; and he responds by making dignified salaams and smiling at the crowd. The townspeople arrange themselves around as he addresses them from the saddle, facing the auditorium.*

NARA SINGH. Brothers and Sisters! In a few minutes our beloved ruler will be amongst us again, to seek a well-earned rest after months of victorious activity against the enemies of the *raj*. Ever since the revival of the Jhansi *raj* nine months ago, Rani Lakshmi Bai—as you all know—has been the driving force of the administration at home and the inspiration of our troops in the field. It is due to her alone that the *raj* to-day is at least as strong—if it is not stronger already—as ever it was in Raja Gangadhar's time. Is it not our duty, therefore, to greet our Princess with feelings of heartfelt gratitude and deep affection; and to celebrate the triumph of our warriors over the armies of Natche Khan and the Orcha Raja? (*Loud cries of "Dewan Sahib-ki-jai!"*) I go now to meet our respected ruler outside the city gates and to conduct her here,

with proper ceremony. See to it, please, that the welcome you offer represents in some measure the sincere acknowledgment of the people of Jhansi for the marvellous feats of arms that our gallant troops have performed under the inspiring leadership of our beloved Princess and her noble Father.

(NARA SINGH then rides off to further shouts of "Dewan Sahib-ki-jai"; and afterwards the entertainment proceeds for a further period. Soon a sound of bugles is heard, which develops into a rhythmic clamour of Indian drums, cymbals and reed pipes, punctuated at intervals with bugle notes and blasts upon conch-shells. As the music—very barbaric and undisciplined—comes closer, the sound of male voices chanting in unison strikes the ear; and immediately afterwards groups of armed men stream into the arena from all sides. They are preceded by bands of musicians, buglers, and conch-shell blowers. Many of the troops are bearded Moslems from Afghanistan and the Rohilla country, or Maratha warriors from the West of India; and there is a bewildering medley of arms and accoutrements displayed by the fighting men. Matchlocks, rifles, bows and arrows, spears, as well as swords and daggers, are to be seen; while the uniforms vary from the spick-and-span models of the Bengal Army sepoy to the primitive hunting-costume of the aboriginals, who are mostly present in the capacity of camp followers and porters. Shields, breast-plates and pieces of body armour are also in evidence. The troops chant the following verses as they march into the yard, in some cases beating time to the clash of arms or the clapping of hands.

"Long live our Rani, Lakshmi Bai!
 Bundelas weep and Rajputs fly!
 And Nathe Khan has learned to cry:
 'Rani-ki-jai!' 'Kumar-ki-jai!'

“Up with the standard—red—on high!
 Let friend and foe our flag espy!
 In Jhansi rules our Lakshmi Bai!
 ‘Rani-ki-jai!’ ‘Kumar-ki-jai!’ ”

The townspeople take up the refrain and shout the verses with the troops, to the accompaniment of the drums, bugles, conch-shells and pipes. The din becomes louder and louder; and when it is almost deafening, the RANI appears on her war elephant—preceded by the red standard that has become inseparably associated with her. She is dressed in the uniform of an officer of her Maratha guard, viz. red jacket, white trousers and turban, with a light-blue sash from which dangles a short sword. She also wears a light-blue cockade in her turban. Beside her on the elephant is ANUND RAO, similarly accoutred. NARA SINGH, MAMA SAHIB, RAO APPA and GANGA BAI enter the courtyard on horseback along with the RANI. GANGA BAI wears a similar uniform to the RANI’S, but without the sash and cockade. The RANI and ANUND RAO remain seated on the elephant, while the crowd make deep salaams and gather round—the troops taking up positions in the meantime and continuing their chanting. MAMA SAHIB dismounts and goes within the Palace. NARA SINGH, RAO APPA and GANGA BAI also dismount, but they remain standing near the elephant, which is made to take up a position facing the auditorium. The RANI, after making little salaams on all sides of her, indicates that she wants to speak, whereupon the crowd becomes silent. She makes her speech from the howdah with ANUND RAO at her side.)

RANI. Beloved Friends! My Brothers and Sisters! I am deeply touched by these sincere manifestations of your delight at having us back in your midst! We are more than glad to return, I can assure you; for we have had a trying time these past months in clearing our

territories of the insolent foes who had dared to invade our sacred lands. I am proud to say that with the divine assistance of Shiva and our Jhansi Protector, Mahadeo, the armies of Nathe Khan and the Orcha allies have been hurled back everywhere by our gallant troops. (*This statement is greeted by loud shouts of "Rani Lakshmi Bai-ki-jai!", which are cut short by the RANI holding up her hand and enjoining silence.*) But I must give you a warning, Brothers and Sisters! Our troubles are not over! Soon we shall be at grips with a much more serious enemy than the Orcha raiders and Nathe Khan. News reached us on our way home that the English have assembled a large, well-equipped and trained army at Saugor; and that they are already on the march against us. (*The crowd look serious and exchange glances meaningly with one another.*) Be of good heart, however! Our cause is just and our resources for dealing with this threat are sufficient. Not only is Jhansi well stocked with foodstuffs and provisions of war, but we have been promised immediate and abundant help in men, munitions and guns by Tantia Topi and the Banpur Raja, as soon as we are attacked by the English. (*Cheers and shouts of "Jhansi Raj-ki-jai!" burst out here.*) Do not be downcast, therefore, at the prospect of seeing the enemy before our walls quite soon. If you stand firmly behind our fighting-men, there can be no doubt as to the issue. (*More cheers and shouts.*) Many princes and rulers will come to our aid, once we make a determined stand against the white invaders.

(*Still more cries of "Rani-ki-jai!" "Kumar-ki-jai!" are heard from the crowd and the troops burst out once more into their marching song. While this is going on, the RANI and ANUND RAO are assisted off the elephant, which is removed from view. The RANI, occupying a cleared space in the middle of the crowd with ANUND RAO by her side,*

places her hands supplicatingly before her, palm to palm; and speaks to those round about her.)

RANI. And now, Brothers and Sisters! If you will excuse me, I will go within to cleanse and refresh myself for a visit to the temple of Mahadeo. I am hot and tired and dirty! But I have asked my revered Father, Mama Sahib—whose skilful leadership has brought victory to our arms—to speak to you for a little while from the Ceremonial Balcony, so that you may learn some of the details of our recent campaigns and appreciate intelligently the valour of our troops. This evening I am to receive the leading townsmen to discuss with them the necessary plans for defending Jhansi against the English. You will all know in good time what the *raj* expects of you during the fighting and how it will assist you in the matter of food, water and protection. Those of you who are Hindus ought to visit the temples, immediately. Mama Sahib has finished speaking to you, to offer thanksgivings for our victories and to beseech the Gods to help us in this critical struggle that awaits us. The Mussulmans, I know, will make intercession to Allah on our behalf. Salaam, Friends! Do not give way to fears or doubts about the future! All will be well! But, on the other hand, do not waste any time in feasting and idleness! A serious task awaits us all; and now we must set to work to make ready for it!

(As soon as she stops speaking, thunderous shouts of "Rani Sahiba-ki-jai!" and "Kumar Sahib-ki-jai!" fill the air; and the soldiers once more break into their song, this time clashing their weapons, waving their arms and throwing things up into the air. Meanwhile the RANI, bowing over her folded hands in all directions, turns and goes within the Palace, preceded by the red standard and followed by ANUND RAO, NARA SINGH, GANGA BAI and RAO APPA. As she disappears, MAMA SAHIB comes

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on to the Balcony; and the crowd, seeing him, set up a further shout of "Mama Sahib-ki-jail", which he acknowledges with salaams. The curtain falls on the shouting crowd, surging under the Balcony to hear what MAMA SAHIB is going to say.)

CURTAIN

SCENE TWO

SETTING. *The Durbar Room shortly after midnight on April 2, 1858, during the siege of Jhansi by British troops under the command of SIR HUGH ROSE (afterwards Lord Stratthmairn). The gadi is once again in evidence, but this time it faces the auditorium. The room is in a state of disorder and on all sides there are signs of military activity—muskets, swords and accoutrements being strewn everywhere. From outside comes an occasional crackle of rifle-fire, but no cannonading is heard until the end of the scene. The RANI, dressed in her uniform, is seated on the gadi, with ANUND RAO beside her. She is meeting her Council of Elders for the last time. Her face is pale and drawn with anxiety; and although she maintains an attitude of inflexible calm, she gives the impression of suffering acutely within. In front of her, seated on the floor, are a number of elderly men, mostly Hindus, all with serious faces and bowed heads, listening to the grave words of NARA SINGH, who sits on a low stool facing the auditorium but rather to the right of the gadi. MAMA SAHIB is similarly seated, facing the townsmen and auditorium, alongside the DEWAN. RAO APPA and GANGA BAI (in uniform) are to be seen standing to the left of the gadi. They take it by turns to go out onto the Balcony and look for signs of the expected attack.*

NARA SINGH (*struggling to restrain his sobs*). Brothers and Friends! The time has come when we must face the horrible truth that has been growing more and more inescapable during the past few days. So long as there was a prospect of Tantia Sahib coming to our relief, our chances of holding out against the English were fair. But now that Tantia's troops have been defeated under our very eyes and he himself has been forced away from the Betwa towards Kalpi, our over-

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throw is inevitable, especially since our other ally, the Banpur Raja, has been put to flight already.

FIRST ELDER (*fatalistically*). The ways of the Gods are inscrutable! Who would have thought that Tantia Sahib's mighty army could have disappeared like smoke before a handful of the Company's *sepoys* and white soldiers?

MAMA SAHIB (*looking very haggard and speaking jerkily—the effects of nervous strain*). It is those accursed guns of theirs—and their discipline. Artillery that can smash down walls like ours can do anything. Even our fiercest Afghans tremble involuntarily when they hear those heavy guns pounding away, day and night, at what were once considered our impregnable defences. Impregnable! Huh! They've made a breach already that's big enough for a cart drawn by bullocks to drive through! And all our efforts to repair it have proved in vain! No sooner do we build up the stonework during the hours that they are quiet than their gunners smash it all down again!

RAO APPA (*stoically calm*). That is true also about our gun positions. Whenever we build up a place for our guns to fire from, they concentrate their aim on it and sooner or later it is destroyed—very often with our men and their inferior weapons as well. We have not a single gun of any weight in action against them at the moment; and if this Palace were not in a sheltered position, it would have been blown up long ago.

MAMA SAHIB (*with nervous irritability*). I tell you it is not their guns only! Their discipline counts as well! When the English Commander gives an order, he knows that it will be carried out or that men will die in the attempt to do what he wants done. Our men are every bit as brave as the English soldiers, but no one will carry out orders! If I say that something must be done, I have to stand by and see that it is done. Otherwise I might as well issue instructions to the

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wind! We fight as individuals; they work like a team of oxen driven by one man. That is the real difference! Big guns and good discipline!

RANI (*wearily*). Would it not be better for us to consider what we are going to do when the English enter the town? Our fate is sealed, so let us talk of what is likely to happen to us all within a few hours.

ANOTHER ELDER. Ah, Rani Sahiba! What does it matter as to our future? Our hearts are torn with dreadful fears about your own fate! We have heard that the English are shooting prominent persons with cannon—blowing them to the four winds in little pieces. (*Cries of horror.*) How can we think about ourselves when such a prospect awaits our saintly Lakshmi Bai?

(*The rest of the ELDERS shake their heads in sympathy with this sentiment and chant: "Hai! Hai! Lakshmi Bai! Bechari Rani Lakshmi Bai!"*)

RANI (*smiling sadly and making small salaams in all directions*). Fear not, Friends! Lakshmi Bai will not provide the English with ammunition for their devilish guns! (*Taking a dagger out of her bosom and exhibiting it*) If my dead body gives them any satisfaction, they are welcome to it! But alive they shall never take me! (*Murmurs of satisfaction, expressed sadly.*) But we are anticipating too much. What are your plans, Father?

MAMA SAHIB. The fighting-men are all determined to sell their lives dearly. We shall get no mercy from the English if we fall into their hands. So, rather than surrender, we shall die, fighting to the last.

THIRD ELDER. Every way of escape for the townspeople has been cut off. This evening, after news of Tantia Sahib's defeat reached us, a number of my friends and their wives and families tried to escape from the northern gate. But the English cavalry and *sowars* soon discovered what was happening; and those who were not killed and trampled on rushed back to the

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town in a state of panic. We shall have to accept whatever fate has in store for us.

RANI. When do you think the English will attack, Father?

MAMA SAHIB. At any time—now that the town wall has been breached. I would not be surprised if this General Rose attacked at sunrise, in spite of the fatigue of his troops after their action against Tantia earlier to-day. He is an impulsive leader and always anxious to strike first.

RANI (*standing up and speaking with decisive energy*). Then we must make our plans at once. I have made up my mind that the civilian population—especially the women and children—must not be made to suffer any more in this dreadful fighting. Too many women's lives were sacrificed when we tried to repair the walls and gun positions. Therefore all the houses on the south side of the town, where the breach is and the attack will surely be made, must be evacuated immediately. The people not actually engaged in fighting must all assemble in the north of the town, where the Dewan Sahib will take charge and be ready to surrender, as soon as the English appear on that side. Our fighting-men will be concentrated in the south, where every house right up to the Palace here must be held—till its defenders are either killed or unable to stand. The Palace must be held to the very last, so that the English may be kept engaged inside the city, while the citadel is being quietly evacuated by myself and a picked body of horsemen, whose special task it will be to see that Kumar Anund does not fall into the hands of the enemy. So long as the Kumar is free, there will always be a chance of setting up the Jhansi *raj* at some future time. Tantia Sahib sent me a message from the Betwa, urging me, if Jhansi should fall, to join him, with Kumar Anund and as many men as possible, at Kalpi. Have courage, Friends! Sivaji had to fly for his life from the Moguls—and yet

he overcame them in the end! Jhansi may fall into the hands of the English now, but if we have faith and are worthy it will be ours again.

(There is a significant pause after this speech; then, following the lead of the FIRST ELDER, the assembly start beating their chests and chanting the following refrain to the accompaniment of head movements and moaning sounds:—

“Hai! Hai! Lakshmi Bai!
Bechari Rani Lakshmi Bai!

“Hai! Hai! Kumar-ki-jai!
Gia Rani Lakshmi Bai!”

The RANI looks sadly at them for a little while; then, coming down from the gadi, she makes each one rise in turn and gives him the Hindu woman's salutation. Each returns the RANI's greeting and then bends and touches her foot with the right hand, thereafter lifting the same hand to the forehead. After each ELDER has taken leave of the RANI, he turns and goes towards the door, where he faces round once again and makes a deep salaam before departing. The wailing is continued by the ELDERS who are still in the room and some of them break into sobs and tears as they finally greet the RANI. All those who remain after the ELDERS have departed are visibly affected, especially MAMA SAHIB, who, unable to restrain himself, rushes across to where the RANI is standing and flings himself prostrate at her feet, sobbing wildly.)

MAMA SAHIB (*speaking brokenly between his sobs*). Forgive me, Daughter, for this terrible calamity that I have brought on your innocent head! If my death would lessen your pains in any way, I would gladly take my own life at once.

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RANI (*raising her father and embracing him in the way that Indian soldiers embrace one another*). You have nothing to be ashamed of now, Father! The past is blotted out by what you have tried to do for Jhansi during these last months. You have taught me to be a worthy Maratha woman; and so long as there is life in my body, I shall honour your teaching. Fate has decided that we should be parted now—you to keep the English engaged until you fall and I to try and escape with Anund, so that the fight may be continued later. May the Gods in their Wisdom and Greatness give each of us the strength we shall need to carry out our duties!

(MAMA SAHIB *makes a deep Hindu obeisance with folded hands and then touches the RANI's feet with his right hand, which he afterwards raises to his forehead.*)

MAMA SAHIB (*speaking with bowed head*). I am humbly and overwhelmingly proud of you, my daughter! And I can now go to my death certain in the assurance that no matter what the future may hold for you and Anund, the story of Rani Lakshmi Bai, my own beloved and gracious child, will live for ever in the hearts of the Maratha people, and will even be talked of and remembered by all the sons and daughters of Hindustan, whenever they recall the great deeds of great people. (*He bows low, makes a deep salaam and then rushes out of the room.*)

(*There is a pause, after which NARA SINGH comes forward and, bending down, touches the RANI's feet with his right hand, which he raises to his forehead. He then stands up and speaks.*)

NARA SINGH (*pleadingly and with scarcely concealed sobs*). Rani Sahiba! I am your most obedient slave! But I beg you to find someone else to perform the task you have allotted to me. Much rather would I seek my death with Mama Sahib and the troops.

RANI (*with great dignity*). Dewan Sahib! Do you think that I am contemplating flight because I like it? Do you not know me sufficiently well to understand that I am giving up the chance of an honourable death at the head of my troops, because I feel that we may yet have a chance of retrieving our fortunes if Tantia Sahib can make a stand against the English? I am doing what I do not like, Dewan Sahib, because I believe it to be my duty. You must do the same—otherwise you are no true servant of Lakshmi Bai.

NARA SINGH (*bending low and salaaming*). Forgive me, Princess, for being such a blind fool! I know now what my task is. And should the English spare my life, my heart will always be secretly awaiting the time when the red standard will once more be waving over Jhansi and when people will once more be shouting: "Rani Sahiba-ki-jai!" "Kumar Anund-ki-jai!" (*He goes out, making low salaams.*)

(*As NARA SINGH is concluding his speech a cannon-shot is heard, quickly followed by another. Heavy gunfire then breaks out, interspersed with rifle firing. GANGA BAI rushes on to the Balcony and RAO APPA takes ANUND RAO by the hand. NARA SINGH then leaves the Durbar Room and the RANI turns in the direction of the Balcony, where a red glow is visible.*)

RANI. It must be the English attacking! (*Shaking her hand threateningly in the direction of the Balcony.*) They are up early—but not early enough to catch Lakshmi Bai! Quick, my loved ones! Let us make for the citadel, where a troop of horse is in readiness to accompany us to Kalpi. We shall have to let ourselves down from the walls and cut our way through; but in the confusion of the attack we should be able to get clear. Hurry! There is no time to be lost!

(*GANGA BAI, who has returned to the room, and RAO APPA seize bundles that have been kept in*

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readiness. They rush out of the room with ANUND RAO between them. The RANI follows, but when she reaches the door she stops and turns. She then gives a hasty but yearning look all round the Durbar Room, as if imprinting its features on her mind. Finally, drawing herself up, she bows her head over her joined palms, stifling a sob. The curtain falls on her in this position.)

CURTAIN

SCENE THREE

SETTING. *A flower garden at Kotah-ki-serai, a caravanserai close to the city of Gwalior, on the evening of June 17, 1858. An incident of battle during the operations of the British forces against Tantia Topi and the RANI OF JHANSI, who are temporarily in control of Gwalior, the Maharaja Scindia having abandoned his territories for the time being. Sounds of fighting can be heard in the distance. The RANI, dressed in her uniform, has been mortally wounded by a shot in the left side and a sabre cut on the head. She has been carried into the garden to die and is attended by her faithful followers, RAO APPA and GANGA BAI. The latter—also in male uniform—is distraught with grief. She is seated with the RANI'S head in her lap, bathing and staunching the head wound with water that a sorrowful gardener offers her in an earthenware vessel. RAO APPA stands helplessly at one side, with tears streaming down his face. He has lost an arm and looks very war-worn and tired. The RANI, who has been placed on a mattress, has sunk into a coma; but she stirs and recovers semi-consciousness after a little while, giving utterance to rambling and disconnected thoughts.*

RANI (*without opening her eyes*). Why does not Tantia Sahib attack? We always wait for the English to advance first. We must attack ourselves. Let every man who turns back be shot. (*Pause.*) Anund! (*Pause and then louder*) Anund! (*Pause and still louder*) Anund!

(*The RANI sits up suddenly and looks around. Then, wincing with pain and holding her left side, she utters a little cry and falls back on the mattress—GANGA BAI receiving her head with tender care.*)

RANI (*moaning*). We are lost, Ganga Bai! We are lost! Shiva has deserted us; and Maharaja Scindia was

right! Wherever we fight we are driven back! My Father went first! Then Anund! Now I go, too! Big guns and discipline! That is the secret of their power!

(There is a pause, during which the distress of GANGA BAI and RAO APPA increases. Suddenly the RANI sits up again, her hand to her side, making a supreme effort to regain control of her waning powers. Her brain clears and she speaks in commanding tones to RAO APPA, who listens weeping, with bowed head.)

RANI. Subadar Sahib! I entrust you with my last message to Tantia! Go and seek him out at once and deliver it! Tell Tantia Sahib that the English are not in strength around Kotah-ki-serai, although they have driven us back through the cowardice of our men. Tell him that if he attacks here quickly he can break through to Sipri; and so clear a way for himself to the Maratha country in the west. Give him Lakshmi Bai's last greeting and say that I bid him attack at once—otherwise it will be too late and he will be caught in a net. Hurry, Friend! And may you attain everlasting merit for all your loyal service to me and to Jhansi.

(The RANI falls back exhausted; and RAO APPA, weeping still more, throws himself on the ground in a deep obeisance. He then rises and, bending down, touches each of the RANI'S feet in turn with his only hand, which he raises to his forehead after each foot is touched. Finally he bows his head and rushes out of the garden. There is a pause, after which the RANI once more regains semi-consciousness.)

RANI *(in low, affectionate tones)*. Anund! Anund! Go and begin your studies, Son! You've had enough *tulwar* practice to-day! Remember what Dalhousie Sahib told you! *(Suddenly she sits up and cries out:)* Kumar Anund-ki-jail *(She then falls back dead into GANGA BAI'S arms.)*

CURTAIN

FINAL TABLEAU

The dead RANI in the garden at Kotah-ki-serai, with GANGA BAI weeping at her feet, is surrounded by British soldiers standing at attention. They are dressed in the uniform adopted by some of the European troops during SIR HUGH ROSE's Central Indian Campaign, viz. "a loose stone-coloured cotton blouse and trousers, and a puggree of the same colour." GENERAL ROSE walks in with his staff and halts abruptly in front of the body, at which he looks steadily for a few moments.

GENERAL ROSE. SHE WAS THE BEST AND BRAVEST OF THEM ALL!

(He pulls himself straight and, drawing his sword quickly out of its scabbard, salutes the RANI. The other officers do likewise and the soldiers present arms.)

CURTAIN



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